

The Cave: A Search for the Mother's Story in Narrative Literature

Helena Kadmos

BA

Grad. Dip. Education

Grad. Cert. Professional Writing

This thesis is presented for the degree of

Research Masters with Training in English and Creative Arts

Murdoch University

March 2010

I declare that this thesis is my own account of my research and contains as its main content work which has not previously been submitted for a degree at any tertiary education institution.

.....

Helena Kadmos

Dedication

To Tricia and Fiona, who for many years were cherished neighbours in their caves, and with whom I enjoyed coffee and muffins often.

And to my boys.

Abstract

The mother's voice is underrepresented in literature. The mother has been a silent figure, always present, often near, featuring in the story of another, but rarely the focus of the story. She has been spoken for, about and around, but rarely empowered to speak for herself.

In this thesis I argue that the mother's story, in narrative fiction and memoir, should be available, and culturally valued. Since the diversity of women's experiences of mothering cannot be explained by any single theory or ideology, narrative may articulate the complexities and ambiguities experienced in motherhood in ways that scholarly discourses do not always allow.

This thesis includes a creative component—a collection of related fictional stories narrated by one mother, and entitled “The Cave”. Adopting the concept of the cave, as a metaphor for the transformative potential of mothering, the fiction draws on the mundane, everyday experiences of a life that is centred on caring for children. The exegesis that follows is based on three approaches to mothering narratives: their research, reading and writing. It explores the emergence of the mother's story within theoretical discourses around motherhood, and its more recent appearances in fiction and non-fiction narratives. It suggests reasons for the absence of the mother's subjective voice, argues that women have been disadvantaged by this silence, and seeks new possibilities for representing the complexity of mothering experiences.

Table of Contents

Abstract	
Acknowledgements	i
The Cave	1
Marooned	3
Fallow	23
Moving	40
Exegesis	64
Introduction	65
Chapter 1: Researching Motherhood	75
Chapter 2: Reading Motherhood	91
Chapter 3: Writing Motherhood	107
Conclusion	116
Bibliography	123

Acknowledgements

This research project would not have reached completion without the generous support of my supervisors. I thank Dr Simone Lazaroo and Dr Anne Surma for sharing their time and knowledge, and for patiently and expertly helping me to discover my own voice.

Professor Vijay Mishra's meticulous teaching of the finer points of the research process equipped me with the skills to get started, and Dr Cecily Scutt's writing skills workshops and fabulous "Writing Space" ensured that I stayed on track.

I thank Stuart Fenner, for his love and unwavering support from the very beginning. Additional thanks to Stuart, Tricia Mitchell, Jane Miles and Jo Morrison for their critical readings of various chapters of this thesis along the way.

The Cave

Whether one is a monk, a nun, a hermit, a housewife or a businessman or woman, at one level it's irrelevant. The practice of being in the moment, of opening the heart, can be done wherever we are.

Tenzin Palmo.

In Vicki Mackenzie, *Cave in the Snow*.

1993

Marooned

... we lived like castaways on some island of mothers and children.

Adrienne Rich, *Of Woman Born*.

Last week it rained, unexpected but welcome. It's been clear since, but for two days the world was a different place—a fleeting promise of something else. I woke to a room darker than usual, and a soft and constant drumming on the roof. I lay listening to its rhythms and the pattering in my own heart. The change in the air stirred a quiet optimism inside me. I was sure that nothing could spoil my determination to enjoy this day with my children.

Instead of getting up with Martin, I stayed in bed with Abby curled up beside me. Paul climbed in too and the three of us spread out under the blankets and watched Martin get dressed. He stood close to the corner of the room, turning modestly to the wall to step into his trousers. He's taken to wearing proper business shirts since he began working at the hospital, and he carefully pulled a blue one out of the wardrobe. I nearly teased him about not looking like a real social worker anymore. He picked up his shoes and left the room. Abby's hands found their way under my pyjama top. Her palms stroked my breast. Paul's legs straddled mine, and for once I didn't ask him to move.

When Martin came back he had two cups of tea. I pushed myself up against the bed head and the kids seemed to fall away from me. I took my tea. Martin sat on the end of the bed, lifting his out of reach of Abby as she crawled onto his lap. The sky snapped and we all jumped and then giggled excitedly.

'It's a m-monster, Mummy!' Paul laughed and I tickled him with my spare hand.

'Do you think it will find us?' I growled.

He shrieked. Abby picked up on the excitement and bounced harder on Martin's lap. It was an effort for us both to keep from spilling tea. I waited until Paul was settled again before I took another sip.

'I don't think I'll go anywhere today,' I said. Paul tapped my elbow.

'What about ... kindly?' His face was hopeful.

'Not today,' I replied. 'It's Thursday.'

He kicked the sheets in approval. On Wednesday he'd been particularly difficult, refusing to go inside the classroom when his teacher opened the door. I'd tried sweet-talking and then grew sterner with him, until eventually Mrs. Calleja pulled him off me. I was still cross with him about it when I returned at noon. He came running towards me smiling, a paper bag kite flapping on the ground behind him, and suddenly my anger felt absurd.

Nevertheless, his resistance to being left anywhere isn't getting any better. My mother even commented on it. I rang her recently to ask her to baby-sit so that Martin and I could go to the movies to see *Sleepless in Seattle*. She'd sounded quite happy until I asked her to come to our house. She prefers to be on her own territory. She loves to see the kids but gets bored quickly if she hasn't her own things around her. Paul, on the other hand, is very happy to be at Nana's house, as long as I'm there too.

'He's the child', she said, 'and you're letting him get the better of you.'

Who's the child? I thought, but I said that it was fine; we'd just see the film separately. Then she said I was oversensitive, and the conversation had ended with nothing resolved.

I don't feel at Paul's beck and call, but his clinginess is draining me. When I saw the look on his face in the bed I knew I had to make it clear to him that I can't be with him all the time.

'You'll have to go to kindy tomorrow,' I told him. 'And I expect you to be a big boy about it.'

He kicked the blankets again, knocking my saucer. Tea slopped out of the cup. Expecting a response from me, he screwed up his face until his nose went white at the tip. Abby bounced too, but Martin settled her by pushing his face into her dark hair until their heads were one mass of chocolate curls. While Abby is her dad all over, Paul really is a meld of us both. He has my red hair but Martin's long nose and chin. Martin looked up from Abby's hair at me.

'If you're not planning to go out, can I have the car?' he asked.

He usually takes the bus to work, but he gets home quicker when he drives, which helps on Thursdays.

'Sure, especially if you can be home a little earlier.'

I hadn't prepared my lessons yet. I now teach only four secondary students, one after another, on Thursday nights. It's the thinnest of threads to a career of sorts. But often, even four students are hard to pull myself together for, and I have to readjust myself like a crumpled suit. If I complain about this Martin is quick to say that I don't have to teach. Then I get defensive, and this push and pull—his suggestion and my reaction—reminds me that teaching is still important to me. Maybe it's just a glimpse of a life that isn't all about our kids. Maybe it's something I sense I'll need one day.

Martin stayed to finish his tea. We heard his usual bus pass the house, splashing water up the kerb because it hadn't slowed down as normal. He could have stayed even longer but he seemed restless, as though his time with us was undeserved. He ruffled Abby's hair and she stretched her arms up above her head. They only reached his chin. He got up to leave and she crawled back under the sheets. The three of us rolled towards each other. He leaned across to kiss the kids and almost overlooked me, but I pulled him towards me, his fine stubble chafing my fingers. His lips brushed my cheek but I couldn't catch his eye. As he left he paused at the door and looked back at us regretfully.

'It's not fair,' he said. 'You're all too hard to leave.'

'Stay with *us*,' said Paul. He reached up teasingly, knowing that Martin wouldn't come back. I chanted 'poor Daddy, poor Daddy,' and Paul joined in until we heard the car start up and reverse onto the road. Another snap from the sky. We giggled again and I pulled the quilt up over their heads. They struggled out laughing and, over Abby's shoulder, I patted Paul's back to calm him and keep them with me a little longer.

Because of the rain and not having the car, I felt like I was on holiday. We were marooned, Paul, Abby and I, alone but sheltered. The outside world with its grey and splintered sky had not found us. It felt thrilling and precarious at the same time. But without Martin the atmosphere in the room had shifted, and after a few moments even the small mass of their bodies wedged against mine was too much for me. So I got up when Paul asked for breakfast a third time.

Most mornings, it takes a while for the mother in me to warm up. As I busy myself finding clothes and making toast, I get a clearer sense of where I am and who I have become. Some days this grates with me. But that morning I felt smooth around the

edges. When I turned on the radio I didn't bristle at the DJ's jokes. I gave Paul toast and Abby Weet Bix. I let Paul choose his own clothes and didn't comment on them, or the pyjamas he'd left on the floor. I felt generous and loving as I picked them up and tucked them under his pillow. In my room the pillows on the bed still formed the nest we'd made in them. The sheets were warm under my hands. Smells of Paul's apple conditioner and Abby's milky skin clung to me, and I didn't want to lose them. So I didn't shower. I changed into a pair of loose pants and a red fleecy jumper, pulled my hair back with combs, and kept my bed socks and slippers on.

I thought about ringing Mum, but I decided not to. I didn't want her to know that I was home. I wanted this day, cocooned with the children, to myself.

In the lounge room, Paul had emptied the Duplo onto the carpet. I was pleased to see he'd remembered that he wasn't allowed Lego on the floor because of Abby and had chosen the larger blocks. I sat down beside him with my back to the couch, resting my plate of toast on my knee. For a moment everything felt right. The rain thrummed comfortingly. I watched Paul line up all the blue squares and rectangles. He worked deliberately, picking up each block with his left hand and passing it to his right before placing it down.

'What are you making?' I asked. Abby crawled in between us and put a red square straight to her mouth.

'A sh-ship,' he said. He was taking great care to get his blocks straight. 'Can ... can you help me ... do the green line?'

'Do you want the green over the top of the blue?'

'Yes ... just green ones.'

He separated out the green blocks and I began to clip them over the blue ones like a brick layer, joining two blue blocks together each time. He pushed my hand away.

‘Not *that way*! They’ve got ... to be ... on *top*.’

‘But this will hold the blocks together. It will make your ship stronger.’

‘*No*.’ He gritted his teeth and pointed to the space at the start of the green row where I’d staggered the blocks. ‘You’ve made a *hole* now!’ he said incredulously. He unclipped the square I’d begun with and joined it directly over the blue one.

Even as I argued I knew I should just go along with him. But I didn’t. And I see now that my resolve to be easygoing was very thin.

‘Don’t you want your ship to move?’ I asked.

‘It *will* move.’

‘Not like that. The blocks will come apart when you lift them up.’

‘I’m not g-going to lift it.’

Abby pulled the red block, glistening with saliva, from her mouth and threw it onto Paul’s ship, knocking several blocks out of line. Paul hit her and wailed.

‘You *baby*!’ His nose scrunched again, its tip a white peppermint on his red face. Abby howled in surprise.

‘Paul!’ I grabbed his arm, but when I saw my hand tight around his wrist it didn’t seem to belong to me. I looked into Paul’s face and saw the disappointment in his eyes, and I knew that he too had seen that today really was no different from any other, regardless of me holding him longer in bed that morning. He wrenched himself out of my grasp, twisting his wrist and screaming.

‘*Oww*!’

For an instant my fingers clasped the space where his hand had been.

‘Well that was silly, wasn’t it?’ I said.

‘You ... you ... *hurt* me.’

Sure enough, red and white imprints streaked his wrist. I wondered if it would bruise. He rubbed it vigorously.

‘Don’t exaggerate, Paul.’ My voice sounded feeble. The fragility of my own patience had startled me, too. I knew it wasn’t only his wrist I’d hurt. Abby howled louder. Paul glared at me.

‘Now...I have t-to start...all *over!*’

‘Well *I* can’t help you. I have to settle your sister now.’ Abby reached up to me calling ‘Jen-ny’, which she only does when she’s upset. As I lifted her up I overbalanced, kicking more blocks out of the way. Paul wailed. I reached down for him, but he shuffled out of my reach and hugged his knees. Tears pricked my eyes. I blinked them away to see him sitting like a castaway amongst the ruins of his ship. He looked so helpless I turned away.

Abby was still in her pyjamas. I took her into the room she shares with Paul. Pinning her to the change table with one hand, I opened the cupboard with the other to choose her clothes, but the sight of Paul’s t-shirts reminded me of the look of betrayal on his face when I grabbed him.

Trembling, I picked out navy tights and a pink corduroy dress with yellow flowers sewn onto the pockets. As I took off her pyjamas the phone rang. It switched to the answering machine and I could hear my own recorded voice in the hallway. It was pleasant and inviting, almost mocking, as I tried to still my shaking and confusion. *This*

wasn't how the day was supposed to go. The recording stopped. There was a pause, a breath. *My mother?* I froze, as though afraid of being found. The caller hung up.

I changed Abby's nappy and rolled the tights over her toes and up her legs that had already lost the dimples at the knees. My eyes were still moist but I made an effort to smile back at her wide grin. For an instant it was Paul I was gazing at, until I pulled Abby's toes into my mouth and pretended to chomp on them. She kept smiling, revealing and then concealing the string of tiny pearls along her gums.

It rained steadily. The house was so dark I had to leave the lights on. I sat on the couch and drew Paul onto my lap. He nestled into my neck straight away.

'How's your wrist?' I asked, running my fingers over his hair. He held his hand up to me, close to my eyes.

'It's v-very sore,' he said. 'Its red th-there.' He pointed to a small pink dot. It was probably an old mosquito bite. I kissed it.

'I'm sorry I was rough.' He cuddled deeper into my chest and I pressed my face against his hair. After a few minutes he pulled away, his wrist apparently forgotten. He found some toy cars under the couch and settled into a new game. It seemed I might be able to look at my lessons.

The house has a formal dining room, which we don't need. If we have friends over it's easier to eat in the kitchen, feeding the kids first then taking over the table ourselves. So the room has become an office of sorts, with a desk in one corner, a second-hand computer and a small filing cabinet. I arranged some toys and books for Abby on the floor near my desk. She crawled to the toys straight away, so I pulled out

one of my tutoring files. Within minutes Paul had joined her on the floor. He picked up one of her books and held it up to me.

‘Look M-mummy! The *Chubby Engine*! Can you read it?’ he asked, excited at finding his old favourite.

‘You know that one,’ I said. ‘You read it to Abby.’

‘I can’t read!’

‘But you know how it goes.’

‘I want ... *you* to read it.’

‘I’m busy right now.’

He put the book down. Abby crawled to the bookshelf and pulled some of the larger books off the bottom shelf, and I could see Paul thinking this looked fun, but I caught his eye.

‘Don’t do that. They’ll tear if you’re rough.’

I scanned the file. Two boys attending the same school share their lesson with me. They are studying *The Collector*, which I’ve read many times. I noted the week before that they were bringing in assignments to show me so that was good—nothing to prepare. My one girl student was doing a unit on feature film. I’d promised to photocopy some notes for her. That bothered me. I couldn’t get to the library now, so I would have to type up something instead.

While the computer was booting up I saw that all the books from the bottom shelf were on the floor and that Paul was stacking them in front of himself. Abby had a novel in her hand. She turned the pages with difficulty.

‘No.’ I went over and shoved the books back on the shelf. ‘Paul, can you take Abby over to the blocks?’

‘I’ve finished that game.’

‘What about the train set? Shall I get that out?’

‘With Abby?’ Paul scrunched his nose scornfully and opened his hands in a questioning gesture that seemed too grown up for a small boy.

‘She’ll be alright,’ I said, taking another book out of Abby’s mouth. ‘The carriages are big enough.’

‘Can ... you make a track?’

‘No. You’ll have to do it.’

‘I want *you* to.’ He made two fists and pushed them into his lap.

‘I have to finish this.’

‘But ...’

‘*Paul.*’

Abby pulled herself up to my knees and tugged at my jumper, hinting at a feed. Paul complained that he was bored. And so it went. The house had lost its mellow mood and was dim; the desk lamp a beacon towards which we all gravitated. I felt their bodies pressing into me, needing more from me.

‘What about a video?’ I asked.

‘Awial!’

‘Ariel? ... *The Little Mermaid*? Again?’ I didn’t think I could stand listening to it one more time, but I said, ‘Yes ... that’s fine. You get it out.’

I dropped cushions onto the floor and Paul pushed the cassette into the VCR. It was ready at the opening sequence. Seagulls swooped through a sky grey like ours outside. When the sailing ship heaved towards us, Paul's arms flapped at his side and he looked behind to see if I was watching. The sea shanty struck up and our house was full of other voices, as if we were no longer alone.

I sat Abby on the cushions next to Paul but knew that she wouldn't stay interested for long. Even as I returned to my desk she was looking for me and rubbing her eyes. But Paul would be lost for the next ninety minutes, pleased to be wherever the film took him. If I didn't give Abby something to eat, she would look to me for a breastfeed. I left the computer on, the screen blue and silent.

We all ate cheese sandwiches in front of the TV and then Abby snuggled in closer and reached under my jumper, tugging at my bra strap. She didn't feed for long, and fell asleep, curled up, heavy in body and breath. I shifted her on to the couch beside me. The monitor on my desk had gone black, the opportunity to work lost for the moment. I knew that if I tried to leave the couch I'd upset a fine balance. The rain continued and the room was still dark and felt crisper than before. I felt cold and trapped.

The phone rang. After three rings Paul turned and looked at me impatiently, but again I left it. This time I heard my mother's voice. 'Hel-lo-o? Jen-ny? ... Jenny? Well, *you* know. I'm always happy to help, darling. Just ... ring me.' Click. Relieved that I hadn't answered, I pulled a cushion to my stomach to dull the fluttering sensation.

I lifted the cushion higher and closed my eyes. Paul laughed in bursts throughout the film and each time, as my eyes drooped and my head fell forwards, I was

jolted back from the shadows that hovered behind my eyelids. For more than an hour I teetered between watchfulness and abandon, until the film was over.

Paul sat cross-legged and upright, in the same position he was when the video had started. He turned to me. His eyes were red.

‘Can we watch it again?’

‘No!’ I snapped. But I was chilled from sitting still, and my neck was sore. I felt cross with myself, as though my laziness had made me more tired than before.

When I moved, Abby stirred and woke. Her face was red and her hair stuck to the side she’d been lying on. The sight of her made me yawn. The day was dragging. I’d lost the sense of excitement about doing nothing. It was still early afternoon, and the stretch until five, when Martin would come home, lay before me like a long country road. I suddenly doubted my ability to stay alert and keep everyone safe. Paul tried to climb on to the couch with me. I needed to get up and do something. I pushed him back on to his feet.

It had stopped raining and sunlight lay in strips across the carpet. I went to the window and parted the lacy curtains. The sun had appeared so suddenly that the water on the trees and grass were caught in its glare. The yard was a display of crystals. I called Paul to come and see all the sparkles; he wondered if they were fairies. That he could find magic in dew drops softened my mood. I realized that I wanted something special, and as I couldn’t go out, I had to create it myself. Standing behind Paul with my hands on the windowsill on either side of him, I whispered into his ear.

‘Shall we make muffins?’

‘Do ... you want, just *me*?’ he replied. I was startled. I lifted my hand to his cheek and cupped it.

‘Yes, just you,’ I said.

Grinning, Paul ran into the kitchen for his apron, which is too big for him, but works if I fold it up and tie it around his chest. I put Abby on the floor with a biscuit but she reached up to one of Paul’s kindy paintings, stuck to the fridge with a magnet. I quickly moved her away. Paul climbed onto a chair beside the bench while I turned the oven up high and pulled bowls and food out of the cupboards.

I sifted the dry ingredients and let Paul take care of the last quarter of a cup while I searched for a key addition. Sometimes all I have is a carrot or zucchini, but by luck there were some chocolate buds in a bag tied with an elastic band. With orange rind and a sprinkle of cinnamon, I knew the muffins would be special. I helped Paul crack the eggs into the oil and milk and beat the mixture with a fork.

‘I’m ... cooking Mummy!’ he said, glancing quickly at me.

‘Yes, you are.’

He put the bowl down carefully and looked at me again, his eyes wide and earnest.

‘Abby couldn’t do this.’

I leaned on to the bench top, lightly brushing shoulders with him.

‘No. Only big boys like you.’

I stroked his arm with my finger. I was trying to be there, just for him, but Paul shrugged my hand away. He clenched the fork like a dagger as he stirred. His wrist was so thin it looked like it could break. He complained that the batter was too stiff, so I

finished it off. We dropped spoonfuls of it into the muffin tray, me racing ahead of his fingers as he swiped mixture and sucked it off greedily. We put the tray into the oven and cleared everything away, leaving the tools and bowls soaking in the sink. I took a small wooden tray with carved edges out of the cupboard and placed my cup on it, and a tiny cream and gold coffee cup and saucer from a set I'd bought from the second-hand shop for Paul. His eyes widened when he saw it.

Moving around the kitchen had warmed me up. I looked forward to a real coffee to go with the muffins. I filled the percolator, ready to switch on when the muffins were ready. We had about twenty minutes to wait. Suddenly, the house felt too small.

'Let's collect the eggs,' I suggested.

'Yes,' shouted Paul, turning his back to me so that I could untie his apron.

The garden is divided in two by a low asbestos fence. Behind the house is lawn, and in the back half are fruit trees, long grass and a chook pen which is just a few sheets of corrugated iron leaning against the fence. An opening at one end is closed with chicken wire. Paul had found a plastic milk crate behind the wood shed that we'd filled with straw and put on its side for a laying box. Inside the pen it's dark and warm. Then, one Saturday Martin, the kids and I had driven out to the market gardens and bought two hens. We let them loose in the garden during the day to pick their way through the grass, searching out snails and seeds, and sometimes they remember to go back to the box to lay their eggs. Often, though, we discover nests in other trampled spots in the weeds, sometimes by the crunch of eggshell underfoot. We've taken to calling this part of the yard The Farm. A bucket and various rakes and spades, beach toys really, are kept by the gate. Small holes and dunes, Paul's 'fields', erupt throughout the patch.

Paul likes to put his gum boots on when he goes outside, so he paused at the back door while I took Abby to check for eggs. A canopy of grape vines that haven't been pruned for several years shelters the gate between the lawn and The Farm. The branches twist back onto themselves and the bark has rubbed off in places. We stood under the mat of bare vines and I shook it lightly so that it showered us in drops. Abby caught her breath and buried her face in my shoulder.

We picked our way through a narrow path in the grass. My feet felt damp. I still had my slippers on. When we reached the pen I lowered Abby down close to the milk crate and pulled back the wire. A hen sat on the straw, but she clucked softly and edged out of the way. Abby reached in to the crate and pulled out an egg. Pleased with herself, she passed it to me. I put it in the loose pocket of my pants. She reached for another, but when she withdrew her hand she caught her sleeve on the chicken wire and the second egg fell from her fist onto the steaming ground. Yellow spread out from the crack—a bright streak against the brown. She looked at me expectantly.

'Never mind,' I said, and she smiled and poked her finger into the yolk. I thought she would make a scene, and was relieved when she didn't. I'd averted a fuss. It dawned on me that the increments by which I measure success are as small as that.

Paul came clumsily through the gate because his boots were still too big. He walked carefully so that they stayed on his feet. He took up a green spade and dug into the damp earth. Abby pulled herself to standing and I held one hand and led her a few steps along the path. She wobbled once or twice, but was so strong that I knew she would be trying all by herself very soon. We walked further to the gate and she let go of me to grab the grape vine, its scaly bark against her smooth pink hand. It was good to be

out in the sun with the kids, the wet garden all around us. I didn't want to go back inside, but I had to get my lessons ready. I hoped the fresh air would perk us all up for the afternoon, and after the muffins I'd get some work done.

And then I remembered that I hadn't turned the oven down when I put the muffins in. There is only one right time to get muffins out of the oven. Too early and they will break apart when you prise them out of the tin; too late and they will dry quickly and harden, with none of the oiliness they should have. At precisely the right moment the kitchen will smell of crisp caramel.

'Paul, I'm just checking the muffins,' I said. He grunted from his digging and didn't look at me. Abby stood, supported by the branch. 'Paul, watch Abby. I'll be back in a minute.'

The kitchen smelled fierce and I knew the muffins had overcooked. I folded a tea-towel over twice and used it to pull the tray from the oven. The orange tang was just present but bitterness overshadowed it. The muffins at the back were dark around the crusts and stuck fast to the sides of the pan.

'Shit!' I dropped the tray onto the draining board. It knocked against the percolator. The towel fell into the sink and the anticipation of enjoying the muffins with the kids fell in with it. I stood back with my hands on my hips and all I could see was waste.

I didn't register Abby's crying at first. Paul came to the back door. He stayed half hidden by the door frame.

'Mum-my,' he stammered. He looked tentative, but I couldn't muster the effort to care about him just then.

‘What is it Paul? Go back to Abby.’ And then I heard it properly—fearful, bleating cries. I pushed past him to get outside.

Abby had fallen back onto the slabs under the vine. Only her hands were moving, stuck out beside her and flapping at the ends of her very stiff arms. She cried fiercely, her eyes wide, and something like blackcurrant juice pooled in her mouth. When she saw me she cried harder.

I picked her up and felt a burst of wetness as the egg, still in my pocket, crushed against my thigh. In my arms her small body shook with such tiny convulsions she seemed almost still. Her cry was a question, wondering what had happened to her. I tilted her head back to look inside her mouth. She’d bitten herself but I couldn’t see where or what on. She spat out tiny fragments of bark, I guessed from the branch she’d held on to. I peeped into her mouth but she pulled away. Paul sidled up to me and tried to cuddle my leg.

‘Sh ... she’s bleeding, Mu-mmy!’ he said anxiously, his eyes bright and fixed on my face.

‘I know Paul.’

‘We ... should ring Da-ddy! Can ... *you* ring Daddy?’

‘Not now ... in a minute, okay? *Ssh* baby, *ssh*.’

I searched the crimson pool for her teeth, so new and precious. Were they gone before they’d fully arrived? They were still in there, tiny stars, sweet seeds in a pomegranate mouth. Her crying intensified. Her tongue quivered and I saw a dark flash, a purple split. It was regal. I wiped her mouth with my hand and she pulled away again. Paul pushed his head up between my arms. I snapped at him and he ducked. The slit

flashed again in Abby's mouth. Her tongue was burgundy, marooned by blood. The cut looked deep, but I couldn't tell for certain. I pulled her in close, hugging her head to my chest, and I sat down on the ground amongst the weeds and Paul's dig and the beach toys.

In that moment I felt I became all that Abby needed. I was her home and her comfort. I was enough. Sobbing gently, she reached around me to my armpits. She'd opened her arms for the world and found my breasts. My body filled her. Her face rested against me and the wine coloured spit and her tears made darker spots on my red jumper. Paul stood beyond my reach, his body pressed against the vine. He hugged the trunk as if for support, his eyes downcast, but I could see his blank expression. I thought he was afraid to come near me. I beckoned to him, but he stayed where he was and I followed his gaze to my foot that lay across his green spade, split in two.

Once Abby calmed down, I took them both inside. I put her on the floor and Paul sat almost on top of her, rubbing his face against the top of her head.

'I'll look after Abby,' he said. Abby didn't look sure about that, twisting around and reaching up for me. But I left her with him while I called the telephone health service. I knew that she was going to be alright, but I needed to be assured that I wasn't being neglectful; that she didn't need to see a doctor. 'The tongue is a marvellous muscle,' the nurse said. 'You'll barely notice the cut tomorrow.'

I filled the bath and cradling her gently, washed the red stains from Abby's face and neck, and sponged the egg off my pants. Then, of course, Abby wanted my breast, rubbing her tired face into my shoulder, pulling at my jumper. I lay on my side on the

bed and she fell into the oval-shaped space beside me. Naked and wrapped in a towel, she was all new again; all need, as though her many achievements had vanished. I imagined how thick her tongue must feel, the worry and the taste of it, and how it would scrape on the roof of her mouth. She latched on to my nipple and pulled off it immediately. She tried, pulled off again and whimpered.

The clear sky had been a temporary reprieve. The room darkened again, but the rumblings outside seemed far removed from the warmth that surrounded Abby and me. Paul came into the room and sat on the edge of the bed. He looked at me questioningly. I saw he was trying to guess my mood. I beckoned him with a smile. He lay across the end of the mattress and rested his head on my feet. I curled my toes to include him as best I could. The phone rang and I ignored it again, and this time it went dead after my message. Abby kept trying to latch on to feed, but was thwarted each time.

‘It’s alright,’ I murmured.

She closed her mouth onto my breast and eventually sucked for a few beats, before pulling away and returning. She winced. The milk bubbled at the corner of her mouth and turned pink. In spite of the pain, she continued to reach for what she wanted, and I was grateful that I could give it to her. Holding her against me with one arm, I reached down for Paul with the other. He nudged up my leg until his head was in my palm. I felt humbled. I looked at my hand, so ordinary against the shine of his coppery hair. The same hand that had hurt him that morning, trying to comfort him now. He lay quietly for the first time all day, and together we watched the blood and milk form droplets on my skin.

1998

Fallow

I exist, I simply breathe, I do nothing but live.

Louise Erdrich, *The blue jay's dance*.

The sound of our feet on the bitumen changed pitch. When I looked behind Paul was rooted to the spot, his thumbs tucked under the wide green straps of his backpack. He looked ready for take-off. With his short haircut and long face, I was reminded of Will Smith from *Lost in Space*.

‘I want to go to *my* class first,’ he said.

Abby’s fingers tugged in my hand. ‘Hel-lo!’ she squealed to a girl crossing the quadrangle with her mother.

‘You go,’ I said to Paul. ‘I’ll be there before the bell.’

Every morning the week before, Paul had come with us to Abby’s classroom. Infected by her excitement, he sat in her chair and laughed when his knees hit the desk. He pointed out the long drawers, decorated with animal stickers and the children’s names in large print. He tried to help Abby find hers, but she scowled and told him she could do it herself.

‘It’s only *four* letters,’ she said.

But when he sat cross legged on the floor and did a puzzle with her, exaggerating his surprise when she finished it, she pushed her hands into her skirt so that her shoulders lifted, smiling shyly at him.

I appreciated having Paul with us in those first few days. It softened the forlorn ache that was with me all week. Seeing them together like that—Paul’s flat, coppery hair bent towards Abby’s small fountain of chocolate curls—reminded me of having them at home together when they were little. Now they would both be beyond my reach, every day.

In this second week of term, the novelty of Abby starting big school had worn off for Paul. He lingered behind us, tugging on his backpack straps.

‘It’s alright.’ I nodded towards his classroom.

He kicked the gravel as he turned around. I hoped he’d pick up some enthusiasm once he thought I wasn’t watching, but he seemed edgy as he walked towards his classroom. I wanted to follow him, but Abby yanked on my arm.

‘Hey!’ I snapped, letting go. I still felt sensitive, in all sorts of ways. *I should be over this by now*, I thought. *It’s been months*. Still, the doctor had assured me that many women felt the same. That in some ways my body *had* let me down. Abby looked at me impatiently. I took her hand again.

‘Gentle, sweetheart. Okay?’

At the junior primary block, she twisted away from me and ran into her classroom. I found a hook for her bag, still stiff with newness. A small plastic mermaid dangled from the zip above her name tag. The bag was bulkier now that it had her lunch box in it. I took her water bottle out, refitted the elastic band that held the tea-towel around it and put the bottle on the drinks tray inside the door.

The room buzzed with the excited chatter that comes with the early days of the school year. Children coursed through the spaces between the desks and the reading corner with its brightly coloured bean bags. Parents ducked under sheets of paper strung like washing across the room. Skewed faces in thick paint smiled awkwardly from the pages. But the babies on their mothers’ hips unnerved me. The room was plump with their bodies. Without making eye contact with anyone, I drifted across to Abby, who sat on the floor with a pack of large dinosaur cards.

‘Let’s play Snap, Mummy. *I’ll* deal.’

She sorted the cards slowly between us. Her fingers were small and chubby. I couldn’t believe how competent they were.

‘You need to hang up your bag before you come inside,’ I said.

‘You ... me ... you ... me ...’

‘And you have to bring your water bottle in.’ I pushed on her forehead lightly with my finger to make her look at me.

‘*I will*,’ she said, and ducked away.

We played one game and started a second. A girl with olive skin and long, black pig-tails next to us.

‘Can I play too?’

‘*No*, Letiesha.’ Abby was firm. ‘This is for me and *my* mummy.’

‘Abby!’ I said.

But the girl didn’t seem put out. She jumped up just as Abby slammed her palm down on the cards. And then the bell went. I remembered Paul. I still had a few minutes to get to his room.

Abby bustled about gathering up the scattered cards. I took them off her and scooped up the rest, attempting to calm her down. She wrapped her arms around my neck and stood up. I pulled her back onto my lap, breathing in the fruity scent of her shampoo.

‘Remember, you stay *all* day today.’

'I know.' She craned her neck towards the front of the room where children took places on the mat. The space right in front of the teacher was almost full. I held her chin and turned her face towards mine. Her eyes strained sideways.

'You eat your lunch at school from now on,' I said, wondering how I'd feel about not coming back for her at noon. I squeezed her cheeks together and kissed her on the lips.

'Mu-um!'

As she stood up, the crisp, chequered hem of her dress caught on my finger and I held it for a second, before she reached behind and unhitched it.

When I got to Paul's classroom the wide blue door had already shut. It takes Paul several weeks to adjust to new teachers and their different systems for reading books and homework. So far this term, he'd lost the time to settle in before school because we'd been with Abby. I hesitated, my fist clenched, wanting to knock on the door, but knew there was no good reason to interrupt the class. The chance to be there for him had passed.

I shut myself into the car. It smelt of shoes and apples. Dust played in a shaft of sunlight behind the steering wheel. Feeling empty, and somewhat guilty about Paul, I sighed and the dust particles spun in new directions. As I reversed out of the parking bay I looked over my shoulder and saw only the absence of my kids' faces looking back at me.

At home, the most ordinary things became evidence that my children had disappeared. Toast crumbs on the chopping board. Knives smeared in peanut butter and

vegemite. A bowl caked with dry cereal. Notices for pre-schoolers' activities that I wouldn't go to anymore were still Blu Tack-ed to cupboard doors. It was as though something had just happened in the house and I'd missed it. I was left rattling behind in the thickness of a suburban silence I'd not been aware of before. Any sounds seemed eerily unfamiliar. The clock's relentless tick. A blind tapping against a window's security screen. I supposed the everyday sounds of children had masked these for a very long time. When the fridge stopped rumbling, I tried filling the silence with my own voice, but no real words came out. A loud 'ahhh' petered out on my breath. In the bedrooms, unmade beds and strewn clothes looked as abandoned as I felt. I added the clothes to the pile already on the floor in the laundry. The effort to sort them properly seemed too great. I didn't bother to measure the liquid, and pulled lazily on the washing machine dial.

I looked through the window to the back yard, in full sun. It was already hot, with the promise of higher temperatures to come. I knew the tomatoes needed water. Everything in the garden had gone to seed or shrivelled up after spring, when I couldn't face going back into The Farm. I'd have ignored the tomatoes too, but they'd come through the mulch by themselves and grown strong under the shade of the rampant weeds. Martin felt we shouldn't let them go to waste, so he watered them every evening. But they'd struggle, waiting for water on a day like this.

I turned the hose onto the roots. Water pooled quickly and trickled onto the concrete slabs, forming dark tracks that glistened in the sunlight. I switched the nozzle to spray and showered the leaves quickly to cool them down. The chooks paced noisily

in their new pen, hoping I'd open the door, but I rarely let them out in the garden anymore.

The vegie garden had been my project after Abby started pre-primary last year. Initially, the short, regular blocks of time to myself were blissful. I read books on the couch or in the garden when it wasn't too hot, getting through some of the novels that had piled up on my desk over years. The hours passed quickly, yet when I went to get Abby at lunchtime it was as if I hadn't seen her for days. I was more attentive to her, listening to what she told me about the picture she'd drawn, or the story her teacher had read. But after several weeks, just reading novels ceased to feel enough. When the height of summer passed, I started planning the garden.

I measured out a large square of earth in The Farm, carried slabs from behind the shed and made a path around the garden. I pulled weeds and grass and turned compost and manure from the chook pen into the soil. I was too enthusiastic, too hopeful. Now, as I watered the tomatoes, I realised that I'd planted more than could fit into the space I'd made. Carrots, parsnips, broad beans, broccoli and silverbeet.

And then I discovered I had been growing something else all along, a life so quiet I hadn't heard its whispers. The garden's spring abundance lost its shine that morning when I was picking grubs out of the silverbeet. As I crawled along the slabs, a sharp cramp had stabbed my belly. *Bugger, not now!* The pain had forced me off my knees, and I'd clutched at the sudden trickle between my legs. I counted off weeks, then months. My period was late. Very late. Why hadn't I realized that?

After the medical appointments, the thick plantings of leafy greens and the abundant pumpkin vines overreaching the borders of the garden didn't compensate for

the knowledge that a life had died inside me. I let the plants take care of themselves. The mess of weeds and vegetables that grew in the following months seemed impenetrable.

The backs of my legs tingled, startling me. Mrs Noodle, who'd slunk out of the dry grass, dragged herself against my leg. I shut off the spout and dropped the hose. The cat sprang out of the way but I caught her, picked her up and held her to my neck. She'd come into the family at just the right time, when I needed something small and alive to hold on to. But she wasn't a kitten anymore, and she didn't need me in particular. Her ribs rippled against my cheek and then she meowed and jumped out of my hands. She pranced towards the house and I followed.

Inside, the curtains were drawn but it was already warm in the front of the house. I went into the bedroom where it was cooler—Mrs. Noodle at my heels. The unmade bed beckoned. I lay back on the crumpled sheet. The cat sprang up and delicately stepped between my legs, looking to settle.

'Get off! It's too hot.'

She slid past my hand and sniffed my neck. Her close purring stifled me. I turned on my side. On my bedside table was a book I was trying to get through. *Men are from Mars. Women are from Venus*. It seemed everyone I knew was reading it, but I couldn't get into it. Something more pressing than the differences between men and women nagged at me these days, but I didn't want to dwell on it. A few papers lay next to the book and I turned my attention to them. Mostly bills I'd put aside for later, but amongst them was a re-entry form for the education department. Mum had brought it around the week before school started, and we argued about it.

'I was in the city,' she'd said. 'I thought I was doing you a favour.'

‘Bloody hell Mum, I’m not eighteen!’

‘I assumed you’d want to get in early.’

She was, as always, smartly dressed. She’d let her hair go grey, but kept it in a short, modern style. Her purple-rimmed glasses matched the silver and mauve loops in her ears. Looking at my shorts and thongs, she barely disguised her despair.

‘Gimme a break!’ I pleaded. ‘I can do it myself, when *I’m* ready.’

That was true. But there was something more. The form was nine pages long. The box for “previous experience” had twelve lines in it. I’d not been with the department long enough to earn permanency before Paul was born. For a while I tutored at home, but eventually the effort to “keep my hand in” was too much. I hadn’t opened my teaching books for two years. Thinking of school teaching now felt like starting all over again. I needed time to be sure that I wanted that.

The cat teased the pages with her whiskers. I lifted them out of her way, but she reached up with her paws, assuming it was a game. I put the papers back on the table and drew her in close. She curled against my chest and closed her eyes. *All right, you win.* It really was too hot, and sweat formed where my body touched hers, but the sense of a sleeping body next to me was dreamily familiar. It was easy to give in. It wasn’t long before I was asleep, too.

The next morning, I missed getting to Paul’s room again. I meant to stay only a minute with Abby, but her teacher approached me and I had to ask how Abby was going and before I knew it the bell was ringing again. I didn’t even bother to go in the direction of Paul’s classroom, but headed straight to the car.

As I edged slowly out of the car park behind an enormous four-wheel drive, I felt unable to face the empty house. So I drove instead to the play centre and parked across the road. Sitting there, looking towards the building I'd entered every week for several years, comforted me. Playgroup wouldn't start until nine but a few women had already arrived. They would have the kettle boiled and the toys out before the others got there. That had been me last year. On Wednesday mornings, when Abby didn't have pre-school, we'd still gone to the playgroup she'd attended since she was two. There, babies always needed changing or messes cleaned up, toys had to be unpacked and dragged across the room and out into the yard. And there had been that lovely feeling of women working together to restore order at the end of the morning, putting everything back in its rightful place, ready for another group to come and create the same sort of chaos in the afternoon.

I'd attended the same playgroup through Paul and Abby's early childhoods, but after that day in the garden, I couldn't face the women anymore, and hadn't been back until now. I hadn't told anyone I'd been pregnant. I hadn't even realized myself until the bleeding, and it was that *not* knowing which mattered the most to me. I couldn't shake the feeling that it had been the greatest neglect of all.

I watched the cars pull up. Women wrestled with babies and toddlers, strollers and nappy bags, shepherding their loads through the gate and up the narrow path to the centre. Sandra arrived. Her twins trotted ahead of her. *Look how they've grown!* I leaned forward to call out to her, but stopped myself. I hadn't seen her in six months. It seemed an eternity. And how would I explain why I'd come? I waited until she entered the building before I started the car. I turned around in front of the play centre and drove

away, but got nearly as far as the shops before I realized that I didn't know where I could go. Confused, I swung into the nearest driveway and backed out on to the other side of the road towards home.

On Thursday evening I prolonged saying goodnight to Paul. He's particular about the way he's tucked in. I have to pull the sheet right up over his head, then fold it back and tuck it under his arms. Keeping his body still, he lifted his head slightly. Satisfied that I'd smoothed out all the wrinkles he lay back again. I drew his desk stool closer to the bed and sat down.

'Dad's coming with us to school tomorrow,' I said. 'So he can take Abby and I can go with you.'

Paul's eyes brightened.

'Can I show Dad my dragster? It's way better than anyone else's.'

'I'd like to see it too. Is that alright?'

'It's okay, Mum. I know you wanna be with Abby now.'

'Hey, mister! That's not fair.'

I put the back of my hand against his cheek. He looked uncertain.

'I didn't mean ...'

'It's fine,' I interrupted. I forced a smile, kissed my finger and put it to his lips.

'Love you.'

He kissed my finger. I nearly pulled back his sheet. I wanted to lie out straight alongside him and hold him in my arms. But his bed was smooth, and he was ready for

sleep. I couldn't disturb him now. He watched me for a moment, and I realized he was waiting for me to leave. I stood up.

'Mum,' he asked, 'can you get Dad?'

After I'd tucked Abby in, I went into the kitchen to put away the dishes that had dried in the rack. I didn't hear Martin behind me, and I flinched when his arms snuck around my waist. The dinner plate in my hand slipped an inch but I caught it again.

'Watch it!'

He rested his chin on my shoulder.

'Do you mind about tomorrow?'

'What about it?' I replied, too casually.

'If I go with Paul.'

'Course not.' I pulled away from him and continued emptying the rack. He leant back against the bench.

'He thinks he's upset you.'

'Oh, for God's sake!'

Martin put his hand out towards me.

'Jenny, Are you alright?'

Are you alright? I wanted to ask. *How can you not be feeling it too?*

'Sure,' I said.

'It's weird, isn't it? Having both of them at school now.'

'What difference does it make to *your* day?'

Where had that come from? Martin stared at me, stung. I put the last cup away and went over to him. I tucked my thumbs into his belt. He didn't respond. Reluctantly, I pressed my head against his chest. His hand hovered above my hair.

'Is it the miscarriage?' he ventured.

'No ... it isn't,' I said firmly, looking up at him. 'That's *over*. We hadn't planned it anyway.'

'I know. But Terry said it could take a while.'

'And it *has* been a while. She has to say that, it's what doctors *do*.'

'Still ... I want you to be happy.'

Of course you do, I thought. *So you don't have to worry*. But I couldn't get it out.

I smiled reassuringly at Martin, and he seemed satisfied.

When I woke the next morning I had no reason to expect that anything would be different. But something new happened when I took Abby to school. Outside her classroom, she held me at bay with her hand.

'I'm right,' she said. 'You don't have to come in.'

I swallowed. *There's going to be a lot more of this, isn't there?*

'Okay,' I said. Children pushed past us on both sides. 'I'll go to Paul's room then.'

I wrapped my arms around my waist as I watched her go. *It doesn't matter*, I told myself. But at the door, she hesitated. One foot lifted up behind her and rubbed the other leg. She turned and ran back to me and my stomach lurched. When she pressed her face

into my belly my body caved in for her. I held her a moment, then took her by the shoulders and gently held her at arms length.

Her forehead was smooth and shining. *Yet to be written on*, I thought. Almost as if the trials she'd already suffered, from babyhood hunger to small hurts and scares, hadn't really marked her. I lifted the hair from her face. The curls looped over my fingers. I leant down and kissed her on her forehead.

'That's a special kiss, just for *you*.' Her eyes widened and she smiled, hugging me tightly once more.

Letiesha poked her head around the door. Her pigtails hung perpendicular to her ears.

'Abby, come and see this!' she called.

Abby looked up at me.

'Go on,' I nodded. 'Better get in there.'

Abby danced towards her friend. Letiesha wove her fingers into Abby's and pulled her through the door.

So I got to see Paul's dragster after all. Martin rolled his eyes when he saw me. I gathered he'd been spared no details from our son. Paul had the model close to his face and pointed from one feature to another, but he saw me approaching and grinned.

'Mum!' he called. 'Come see.'

I sat on the nearest plastic chair. He started at the beginning, telling me how he'd made the car. I watched, rather than listened. His face red and frowning with concentration, he explained the intricacies of his design to me. All I could see were a few bits of plastic straw, bottle tops and cardboard glued together. But I barely heard

what he was saying. He seemed a marvel to me, something precious found. Just looking at him was enough.

Later that morning I squatted on the concrete step between the back lawn and The Farm, cradling a cup of tea in my hands. Steam moistened my lips. The sun baked my bare arms. My feet were wide apart and I felt, surprisingly, grounded.

I scanned the garden. The tomato plants were drooping again. Heavy with their late summer crop, they really needed more staking. Musty smells from the chook pen and the sharp tang of lemons hung in the air. Bees swung from plant to plant, their drone making me feel lazy. Unchecked, the thistle had grown into thick stalks, and prickly groundcovers sprawled across the path, covering some of the slabs. Hiding, I imagined, the dark red stain from the blood that had dripped between my legs all those months ago. It will take some time, I thought, to clear that path again.

Mrs Noodle crept nearby. I put my tea down and grabbed her. She hissed when I buried my face in her fur. I sighed, and she poured out of the bend in my arms like cooked spaghetti, in exactly the movement that had delighted Paul and inspired him to name her. I reached for her tail but she escaped, looked back from a few feet away and waved it slowly.

‘Here, puss.’ She stared at me, blinking. I put my hand out for her, as though I had something to offer. ‘C’mon, puss.’ She wasn’t fooled. I dropped my hands over my knees.

What do you see? I wondered.

What did they all see: the cat, Martin, the children? What had Abby seen in my eyes when I kissed her that morning? I dug my hands into my waist. My belly was soft and flabby, not stretched to capacity as it might have been. We'd already decided a long time ago that we didn't want more children, and that hadn't changed. It was Abby I missed, and touching her in all the small ways throughout the day. Handing her an apple (only green, never red), buckling her into her booster seat, holding her hand as we walked along. I missed the simple unfolding of a day that had ensconced us in gentle, meaningful routines. I was struck by the word for it: *purpose*. Is that what they saw now—a woman without that?

As if I was finally catching on, Mrs Noodle came back and rubbed her face against my shin. I pulled her up to me. *You're not going anywhere now*. She didn't resist. I drew my legs together and pushed her into my lap, holding her down with firm strokes. She gave in to them, just as my babies had done so many times. She closed her eyes and purred.

I thought about Paul. It had been different when he'd started school. A new beginning for all of us. And there was some relief, having him out of the way a bit so that I only had Abby to worry about. And over time I'd come to realise that I carried him with me always, no matter where he was physically. The ways in which he needed me were different, but they were real nonetheless. Maybe what I felt about Abby had more to do with how I needed her. A year from now, I felt sure, I'd be in a different place. But for now? Hot though it was, my body trembled. Alarmed, the cat tried to prise herself out of my arms, but I drew her in tighter and pressed my face into her fur. I was

grateful for the solid resistance of her body. She pawed deeper into my lap, stinging me with her claws. I stroked her softly.

‘Sorry, puss.’

She stared at me but I couldn’t read her eyes at all. I lifted her gently to the ground. She arched her back, trembled slightly and disappeared into the long grass.

I looked around The Farm again. I’d had so many plans for it: fruit trees and vegetables and more poultry. It was something I’d thought I would work more on over the years, but there’d never seemed enough time for everything. I’d been in a particular place with the kids for so long, yet already the details of that place were growing fuzzy. Or was it just changing? In front of me the garden seemed all but gone, though the colours of the earth and the weeds and the tomatoes were sharp. Maybe it was salvageable. The basic shape of it was clearly visible. It would be cooler in a month or so. Another autumn. It wouldn’t be so hard putting the work in then. And there was no hurry. I knew there would always be spaces to fill, in the garden and more. But for now I had this moment. And then I sensed it, an immense feeling of good fortune. The privilege to be sitting in my garden, at my home, in the middle of the day. And I knew with utter certainty that this opportunity would pass. *Purpose*, I repeated to myself.

Finding that’s a life long journey, isn’t it?

It really was too hot in the sun. I stood up and my shadow rippled over the tomato plants. And in that trick of light and shade I saw Abby linking hands with Letiesha and being pulled through the door. And I laced my own hands together.

2009

Moving

I see my daughter hurrying away from me, hurtling towards her future, and in that sight

I recognise my ending, my frontier, the boundary of my life.

Rachel Cusk, *A Life's Work*.

I opened my eyes. *How long have I been asleep?* Soft light draped the room. My book was splayed, dog-eared, at the foot of the chair. I tried to work out where the sounds that had woken me were coming from. The exhaust fan in the bathroom murmured, and the vanity mirror slid back. My feet were numb from being curled under me and stung when I stood up. In the kitchen the clock read twelve-forty-five. Light fanned down the hallway. I followed it to the bathroom.

Abby bent over the basin brushing her teeth. The hoisted hem of a short, black t-shirt exposed her back above her jeans. Her skin looked pale in the fluorescent light. I sighed, relieved to see that she was safely home, but I felt like a stalker. I cleared my throat so that she'd know I was there. She turned; her foaming mouth a fake smile. A strand of her long, dark hair was white tipped. Eye-liner seeped under her eyes. She twisted away to spit into the sink.

'What happened?' I asked.

She continued brushing.

'Abby?'

'*Mu-um!*' She turned and glared at me. 'Can I bwush my teef!'

'No.' I felt my anger resurfacing. 'You can't!'

She rinsed her mouth and grabbed the nearest towel. It was mine. She wiped her face on it and dropped it to the floor.

'I thought Letiesha knew the time,' she said.

'It was *your* responsibility!'

'I *know*. I *told* her we had to leave!'

'You should've rung me. Why do you think we bought you a phone?'

‘I didn’t want to wake you.’

‘Are you *serious*?’ I cocked my head to one side. Abby raised her eyebrows. A weight on my shoulder startled me. It was Martin. His hair stood in clumps. He shut one eye against the light.

‘You’re going to wake Paul,’ he croaked.

‘Does that matter?’ I asked. ‘Have you seen the time?’

‘Uh-huh.’ He looked at Abby and nodded into the hallway. ‘Go to bed.’

My throat tightened but I wasn’t going to say anything in front of Abby. I was sure that she smirked as she ducked between us into her bedroom and shut the door. Dissected by shadows, Martin’s face was unreadable.

‘That wasn’t fair,’ I said.

He squinted, still adjusting to the light.

‘It’s a school day tomorrow ... *today!*’ I continued. ‘She’ll be exhausted.’

‘Let me handle it,’ he said, retreating down the hall.

‘When?’

‘In the morning. I’ll talk to her first thing.’

‘Martin,’ I pleaded, ‘she has to know that what she did is not okay.’

He stopped at the end of the hallway.

‘I agree. I’ll *deal* with it.’

‘Who do you think you *are*, the fucking judge?’ Even as the words hissed from my lips I regretted them. Martin rarely swears. When I do, the satisfaction of those hard, unambiguous words is short-lived, and my argument always feels lost. I pulled my dressing gown in tighter.

‘Oh, that’s great Jenny.’ In the darkness, Martin’s arms were black beams as they spread wide. With exaggerated despair, he said, ‘Let’s make this all about *us* now.’ He disappeared.

I reached behind and switched off the bathroom light and for several minutes I stood pondering why I was standing alone.

I woke at six. Martin had already left. He often starts the week at the pool. He says it puts him in the right frame of mind for dealing with old people. He hadn’t mentioned leaving early when he promised to talk to Abby the night before.

I lay in bed, sensing the heavy sleep of teenagers. For many years I’d opened my eyes to a house charged with demands, small faces at the door, enquiring loudly if I was awake. It seemed as if my skin had always been in contact with someone else’s, touching sticky hands and grubby faces, or brushing against the soft, grey coat of dear Mrs. Noodle. I used my lips often, planting kisses on cheeks, foreheads and fingertips. I touched my lips now. They felt dry. And when the kids were small I showered unselfconsciously with the bathroom door open, while they ran from one room to the next dumping pyjamas tops and bottoms on the floor. Now everyone dressed politely behind closed doors. We kept our bodies to ourselves.

It would be several hours before Paul emerged from his room, dragging himself around like a heavy bag. But Abby had to get up for school. I thought about her staying out so late. She hadn’t been to many parties, and she’d been excited about this one because it was her friend’s seventeenth birthday. We even allowed her to go in Letiesha’s car, though I was reluctant. What had Abby understood about my reaction in

the bathroom? Had she seen that I was worried about her? My thoughts swam to an image of her hair, like her father's but long. I loved to tuck my fingers into the curls, but she didn't let me do that anymore. I ran my fingers through my own short, straight hair, coloured a deeper red than my natural shade. Details about the day ahead surfaced. I remembered that Dean would be back in class after three days' detention. *Great*, I thought dismally. I guessed that Caroline would want to see me, expecting an answer about the position. *What will I say?* And mum's birthday is next week. I had to remember to ring her about coming for tea.

I lay for a moment longer, as if waiting for something to happen or someone to come, before I left the bed and began the quiet routine of getting just myself ready for the day.

I usually eat breakfast alone, leaving home as Abby emerges from her room. Cleaning up after a single piece of toast and one cup of coffee feels ridiculously simple. It makes the kitchen seem unnecessary, when for so many years it was the centre of our lives. Here, I'd posted cubes of fruit through my children's tight lips and scrubbed smeared food and snot off their t-shirts. We made play dough and baked cakes. I kissed invisible wounds on the soft pink skin on their knees. The walls, once covered with greasy handprints and crayon drawings, are now dusky pink and unmarked. The fridge door that had been a messy gallery of school merit awards and canteen menus, is stylishly silver and bare. The kitchen is easier to keep clean, but sometimes it feels unbearably empty to me.

Abby came in as I packed fruit between the marked assignments in my brief-case on the kitchen bench. Her hair curtained her face; one leg of her *Little Miss* pyjamas was

hitched higher up her thigh. She tried to pass into the kitchen but I edged across the opening a little and she drew back. She flicked her hair behind her. Her dark eyes stared, but I was stunned by how lovely they were. I looked for signs of remorse but couldn't see any.

‘Good morning,’ I said.

She shifted her weight onto one leg.

‘Where’s Dad?’

‘At work.’ I looked away, sensing something large heading my way.

‘So,’ she said, ‘I guess he’ll talk to me later?’

‘Maybe, but I’m talking to you now.’ I spread my arms on either side of me, forming a triangle with the bench top. My fingers curled under the laminated surface. Abby rolled her eyes.

‘Can I get some breakfast?’

‘In a minute.’ I leant forward onto my hands. ‘Do you understand how angry we are about this?’

‘Oh, c’*mon*!’

‘I said *eleven*, and you deliberately disobeyed me.’

‘I didn’t ... do it ... on *purpose*,’ she replied loudly, as if I was slow to understand.

‘That doesn’t make it right.’

‘Dad didn’t care. Why do *you* have to go mental over it?’

I winced. Why hadn't Martin followed up like he promised? I gripped the bench top harder. The flaking chipboard underneath the laminate caught in my fingernails.

Abby's curls swung about her face as she paced the floor.

'That's *it* Abby. This is your last term before your exams. I'm not going to let you stuff it up.'

'*What* the?'

You won't be going out with friends again until your exams are over.'

'Oh, get *real*!'

'In a few months you can go to all the parties you want.'

'That's not fair! It's *one* mistake!'

'One too many. You'll take our faith in you more seriously next time.'

'*Your* faith?' Abby spat. '*You* didn't want me to go anyway. I heard you and Dad fighting about it.'

'Well, I was right then.'

Abby pushed the heel of her hands into her eyes and lifted her shoulders. I sensed the effort she was making to try and contain herself, and suddenly I felt uncertain, as if I was the one pushing the limits. It felt familiar. My mother and *I* in that position, circling each other and never meeting in the centre.

'Abby ...' I began more softly, but she cut me off.

'Just stop *controlling* me!'

'I'm trying to help you ... to get through this year ... you know?'

She drew herself up to full height, still just short of mine. I flinched. She glared at me.

‘Then just leave me alone,’ she said. ‘Cos your help *sucks*.’

Her words hit me in the chest. I quivered inwardly. I knew better than to let Abby think that words said in anger were irreparable. And there was nothing that I was prepared to return against her. But she must have seen the pity flicker in my eyes. She sucked in her breath and spun around. It looked like a cat-o-nine-tail, the way her hair whipped around the doorway and out of sight. A door slammed, shattering me in its wake.

I travel away from the city in the mornings, so there are always plenty of seats. Around me people slouched against blue velvet upholstery. Some yawned; some tried to extend the time they had to themselves with books or ear buds that connected to their pockets or bags. Discordant rhythms drummed softly. I didn’t read. I felt heavy and reclusive, as if Abby’s anger clung to me and I didn’t know what to do with it.

At the next station a woman I couldn’t remember seeing before got on the train. She was tall and very pregnant. She carried a small handbag, a book and a travel mug. The sight of the mug irritated me. *Doesn’t she know that eating and drinking aren’t allowed on the train?* She sat on the seat opposite me, tucked the mug between her knees and opened her book to a marker half way through. *Life After Birth*, read the yellow title above a black and white photo of a woman and child playing and laughing.

I stared at the woman, noting each detail, pausing sentimentally on her belly. I remembered how my own body had felt; purposefully pushing outwards in curves I was proud of. Now my remnant paunch was a nuisance.

I judged the woman to be a little older than me, yet her clothes were like a girl's. She wore red knee-length pants with bows at the hems, and a pale orange top with puffy sleeves. It tied at the neck, was made of brushed cotton and reminded me of the giant peach in the Roald Dahl book I'd read the kids years before. Her face had the seasoned markings of middle age. Her skin, free of make-up and freckled, fell in tiny terraces underneath her eyes. Her red and blonde highlighted hair was grey at the temples, and drawn back from her forehead with plastic combs. When she moved her head the curls bounced perkily. She wore strappy silver sandals. Her calves were firm and also freckled. I crossed my legs, blotched purple at the back by childbearing.

She sat very straight, holding her book high above her belly, sipping occasionally from her mug. There was an air of unburdened optimism about her that I, churning with disappointment over the fight with Abby, almost resented. Then it occurred to me that this might be her first pregnancy. The unflattering term that I'd heard doctors use for older first-time mothers came to me. *Elderly prima gravida*. There was something satisfying about the way the phrase distinguished me from this woman. I recalled, almost smugly, that when I'd cradled my babies' heads, the skin on the back of my hands had been taut like new sheets; that the breasts I'd fed them with had been high and firm. I sighed. Back then, I hadn't understood what childbearing and aging would do to me. Even though I did, in time, lose most of my pregnancy weight, my body has never been the same. Now, my skin is stretched, my muscles lax.

We travelled past choking queues of city-bound traffic. I wondered about the woman. What kind of life did she lead? Was she married? Then she looked up from her book directly at me, interrupting my thoughts. I turned away to look down the carriage.

The train slowed near a station and she stood up, fumbling to stop the mug falling to the floor. At the door people gave her a wide berth. She nodded slightly, acknowledging the gesture, confidently claiming the space offered her. As a young expectant mother, I'd been shy of that sort of attention, yet now I envied the way her body accorded her special status. She stepped onto the platform without a backward glance. I watched her curls bobbing over the top of the other commuters' heads. As the train pulled away my eyes followed her along the ramp, hoping to see which direction she took, but my view of the station disappeared quickly.

My stop was next. Only a few people got off at this time of the morning; twenty minutes later the platform would be swarming with teenagers. I flipped open my phone while I jostled through the small crowd. I stopped on the pavement so close to the doors that my skirt floated above my knees when the carriage closed and moved away. I pressed Martin's name into the phone and reached his message service. It was seven forty-five. He would still be on his way to the nursing home. I spoke quickly after the prompt.

'It's me. Can you ring me during recess? And ... thanks for *dealing* with it!'

I shoved the phone back into my bag and looked around to see if I'd been overheard. The platform was empty, but I still blushed. I flattened my hair back over my head and held the ends against my neck. I imagined Martin hearing the message and how annoyed he would be at my sarcasm and at being put off guard at work. I wondered if I would hear from him.

The cold in the underpass swamped me. I walked through the tunnel, its blue tiles sprayed in black and silver graffiti. Out in the street the crossing guard was still

placing his flags, so I had to wait for the traffic. I stepped on to the road during a short break and skipped across both lanes quicker than I normally would. The thrill of playing with Martin's temper fired my step. Why should he be spared the brunt of it, the awfulness of Abby's rage?

I slowed down on the hill towards the high school. The soles of my shoes were thin and I could feel every crack in the footpath. I stumbled on a stone and cried out, but it was the thought of Abby, not the stone, that hurt me. Spats with her, like the one that morning, were increasingly frequent. Some days I felt I'd barely recovered from one before another hit. I wondered if she felt the same.

When she was a little girl, she wouldn't enter the school gates in the morning without a "special kiss" from me on her forehead. And when we met again in the afternoon, there was always a look of proprietorial pleasure in her eyes that made me feel that I mattered. But today, she'd let me leave without even saying goodbye.

I leant against a picket fence to rub my foot. The school was nestled in an older suburb. The houses were well-maintained, the trimmings painted in modern browns and reds; the narrow front gardens crammed with roses, agapanthus and hydrangea. But I felt shut in by the brick walls and iron gates. There was no view of the distance to clear my thoughts. By the time I reached the school they were all—Martin, Paul, and Abby—racing through my mind.

The departmental office was empty when I got there. Stacks of photocopied worksheets lay in criss-crossed piles on my desk, nudging a framed photo of the kids that I'd taken when I first went back to teaching. A pink Post-it note curled away from the top sheet. Caroline's handwriting read, *Let's talk at recess. C.* I tapped the note

nervously, toying with ways to get out of the meeting. My phone beeped. I assumed it was Martin, but the message read, *basketbl 2day hom 5*. I felt my face drop and realized I'd been frowning. Abby was good at letting me know where she was; reminding me of her schedules. *Was I too hard on her last night?*

After school I went down to the back of the garden to bring in the washing. Martin had put up a new, larger line where the vegies and chickens used to be and where we'd buried Mrs. Noodle, freeing up space nearer the house for the alfresco area he planned to build. I liked the excuse now to go into this part of the garden where the kids and I had spent so much time. Strong winds had blown all day, so the clothes and linen were unusually soft. I struggled to swing a sheet back over the clothes line so that I could find its pegs, but the breeze continued to play with it and it parachuted above me in a blue cloud. Martin hadn't rung me back, and my convictions from the previous night were waning. I pulled too hard on the sheet and tangled myself in it. When I heard someone call for me the sound was muffled, as if very far away. I was tempted to stay hidden. I pulled the sheet from my head and looked back at the house.

Paul leant against the back door, his long hair a red splash against the white doorframe. His t-shirt bore a picture of a rock band that I couldn't identify. His jeans bowed outwards as he slouched. He held a pick between his fingers. So he'd been home long enough to get his guitar out. I called to him but my voice was lost in the flapping sheet. I pushed the folds away from my face and saw a shadow pass behind Paul. He turned, said something into the room, and went inside. I knew it was Abby he was

talking to. The sky went blue again and I grabbed onto the sheets and drew the corners into my mouth. The air I sucked through them tasted of lemons.

Inside I folded the sheets and carried them into the hallway. Both bedroom doors were shut, but I could hear Paul's playing. All semester he'd worked on a composition and it was nearly finished. He strummed, plucked and slapped the guitar in the new style he was practising. I tapped on his door and pushed it open. The music stopped.

'That sounds great,' I said. 'I like it where you pick up the tempo and then drop back again.'

'Coo!' he said.

It amazed me that young people could abbreviate such a small word. But I knew that Paul didn't really need my opinion. He thinks I don't know much about music. He was just tolerating the praise for my sake.

He started playing the section I'd referred to, strumming with extra flourish as he made his way towards the door. He smiled and lifted one silver-studded eyebrow into mock arrogance. When I looked up into his face I couldn't see anything of the little boy that my life had once revolved around, cuddling and nursing him constantly. After Abby was born, he'd never let me wander from his sight for long before he came looking for me. That was hard at times, but at others comforting to know that my arms around him were usually what he needed most. Somewhere along the way, his nervous apprehension had given way to the confidence he now strutted before me. When he reached the door he bent down and kissed the top of my head. Smiling, I pushed him away with my elbows. I nodded to the loose manuscript and clothing that littered the floor.

‘Clean up that mess when you’re finished,’ I said. He scowled and drew his pick down onto the strings in a loud, hard chord.

It was silent behind Abby’s door. I edged closer to it and leant against the surface.

‘Hello, Abby.’

She grunted back a short reply. As I rested there, my daughter felt far away, and the barrier between us seemed greater than the thickness of the door. My cheek peeled off the door when I moved.

‘Dinner’ll be ready soon.’

At the cupboard in the hallway where we keep the linen, I squeezed the sheets into the only empty spaces I could find. As I stepped back to shut the door, a pink plastic arm fell with a rustling sound out of a brown paper bag on the top shelf. Crammed at the top of the cupboard were things we didn’t use anymore. I hadn’t looked up there for a long time. The arm belonged to Abby’s first baby doll. I couldn’t remember packing it away. Its fingers curled as if beckoning.

I stood on tip-toe to push the arm back into the bag, which moved a little, revealing a patch of light coloured wicker. I gasped, as though I’d stumbled upon a fragile living thing. I lifted down the small basket carefully. Inside, a blue and white cloth covered an old coffee set that I’d bought when Paul was very young. Its small cups and saucers, cream coloured with gold rims, made a much better tea set than the plastic ones from toy shops. It was nearly complete; only the lid of the coffee pot had broken in all the years we’d used it. I fingered the china gently. The tiny handle on the cup only just fit between the pads of my fingertips.

I looked up at the shelf again and remembered other cupboards and drawers around the house that I hadn't opened for years: dark, silent spaces filled with objects that were important to us once. Those places had helped to order a world that spilled randomly about me when the kids were young. I'd delved in and out of those cupboards every day.

It occurred to me that many items had at some point been used for the last time without me being aware of it. How had I stored these cups? Had I shoved them into the basket carelessly, assuming they'd be brought out again, while my eyes followed a trail of Lego that also needed clearing? Would I have handled them differently if I'd known I was putting them away for good? I thought of the woman on the train collecting the bits and pieces that come with babies and early childhood. The time between the beginning and the end of infancy seemed hazy to me. I suddenly wished it was very clear. Standing in the hallway in front of the accumulated contents of my family's life, fingering a small china cup, I felt as though I'd missed something important, almost sacred.

I was reading in bed when Martin came home. We didn't say much to each other at first. I watched him undress, slowly and deliberately, like he always does. He pulled his shirt off and hung it over the back of the chair. He unfastened his belt and took off his trousers one leg at a time. He looked up and I turned back to my book.

'I spoke to Abby,' he said.

I glanced sideways at him.

'When?'

‘Just now. She’s still awake.’ Leaving his boxers on, he lifted the quilt and fell heavily into the bed.

‘You could have come home earlier,’ I said. ‘We had an awful fight this morning, and she didn’t say a word all though dinner.’

He closed his eyes. Soft pockets of skin settled on his cheekbones.

‘I told you I had a meeting.’

‘Last week, maybe?’

I waited, but the urge to prompt him became too strong.

‘Well? What did you *say* ... to Abby?’

He lifted onto one elbow, bracing himself.

‘That parties aren’t a good idea until her exams are over.’

My relief that Martin had backed me up was bittersweet. He’d made me wait for it, but had proved, once again, that we really did work together. Our show of unity made me suddenly sorry for Abby. I put my book on the side table and slid under the sheets. Martin’s fingers stroked my thigh.

‘Stupid, really,’ I said, ‘Courtney’s mum allowing a party on a Sunday night.’

‘Yeah. But Abby knows she pushed it. It’s a fair cop.’

I focussed on the ceiling where the cornice above the bed was freckled with mildew. Abby hated *me*, and somehow I felt that it was linked to Martin.

‘Why am *I* the bad guy then?’

‘Because ... you’re here.’

I turned, twisting my nightie under my waist.

‘And where are *you*, Martin?’

His head jerked back slightly and he rolled back on to the pillow, letting his hand slide off me. I hadn't meant to push him away. I leant over him. My breasts fell against the bodice of my nightie and through the opening they looked elongated, almost foreign. Their emptiness made me feel vulnerable and for a second I mourned the loss of their old fullness. I lay on his chest and looked into his face. I buried my hand in the thick, grey-flecked curls behind his ear.

'Do you remember the tea set?' I asked. 'The one I bought for Paul, for his second birthday, I think.'

Martin ran his fingers lightly over my back.

'The one you used on special occasions?'

'I found it today. There's so much lying around this house we've forgotten about.'

'Are you hinting it's time for a clean out?'

'No ... maybe.'

I reached across, turned off the lamp and moved back to my side of the bed. But in the dark I felt unsettled again. After several minutes I spoke.

'I ... don't want her to go, you know. Abby, I mean. I'm ... I'm not sure what I'll *be*, when the kids aren't here anymore.'

Martin groaned as if I'd woken him.

'You'll be a *grandmother*,' he joked, digging me in the ribs.

'Don't be stupid.' I turned away from him. Tears pricked my eyes and I was ashamed of them. Martin didn't respond straight away. Then he nudged closer and I felt his lips against my ear.

‘You should go for that head of department position,’ he whispered.

‘I’d never get it,’ I said, annoyed that he was missing the point.

‘You might,’ said Martin. ‘Didn’t Caroline ask you to apply?’

‘She tried to catch me today, but I made excuses.’

‘Jenny, you’d be great at it.’

‘It’s the time. I’d have to go in earlier, stay late.’

‘So? You don’t have to be here every afternoon anymore.’

‘I know!’ I snapped. ‘Still, I *miss* them you know. It’s silly, but ... I loved it.’

Martin pulled me towards him.

‘The early days? You were always exhausted. You never had a minute to yourself.’

Is that what it was like? There were days, I remembered, long and difficult, that felt as though they’d never end.

‘There was more to it than that,’ I said softly. ‘I think it mattered to Paul and Abby that I was there. I think it sort of *made* me too, somehow; staying focussed on *one* thing. Well ... that’s how I thought of it then.’

‘Do you still think about ... if we hadn’t lost that baby?’

‘Not really. Sometimes.’

‘There’s more to come,’ he said. He yawned and buried his face deeper in my neck. ‘We’re not free of them yet.’

I cupped his hand in mine. He still hadn’t got it. It wasn’t just about the children. But thinking about it now, and Abby growing up, and the doll in the cupboard, I was reminded, warmly, of a time and place that I’d left behind a long time ago.

His arm was heavy and I knew it would keep me awake. I lay still and waited until the slowing of his breath told me that he was asleep.

My bare feet stuck to the boards as I walked quietly across the room. In the hallway I stood on a chair so that I could pull the bags down carefully from the top of the linen cupboard. In other rooms I fished out boxes from the backs of cabinets. I carried them all into the lounge room and sat on the floor in a small circle of lamplight. Wide awake, I began to sort through the odds and ends of a life I hadn't thought about for a long time.

I'd kept our favourite picture books, as many as fitted into a cardboard box. There was the one about a little girl who loved to build cubby houses, and *Chubby Engine* which I knew by heart. I needed to read it, then and there, trying it silently at first, but that didn't work. I had to whisper to get the intonation that felt right.

'I am a chubby engine. I work the chubby line. I have a chubby coal car, it keeps me running fine.' Some of the pictures were familiar, as if I'd seen them just days before; some were new all over again.

I brought a bowl of soapy water to the floor and sponged Abby's doll, scrubbing a stain off the hair-like grooves in the plastic scalp. In a storage box I found Paul's Duplo. He'd spent hours building skyscrapers and trains and ships. Martin and I thought he'd be an engineer. But only a few years ago he surprised us by wanting to be a musician.

In the bottom of a kitchen cupboard I fished out the wooden tray that I'd used with the tea set. With flowers, a plate of sandwiches, and a pot of "honey tea", it had

been a favourite in the garden for picnics. The intricately carved ridge that formed handles at the ends was dusty. I wiped it clean

I stayed up for hours. There were some things I couldn't find. Abby had a pink corduroy dress that Mum had bought her when she was one. I'd loved it and was sure I hadn't given it away. But I couldn't find it. I wondered what I'd been thinking when I'd passed it on. Then I remembered that I hadn't rung mum yet. *I'll do it in the morning, for sure.* When I thought about the dress, and other items I no longer had, I wished I could touch them just once more. So I took great care now to notice each thing. There were some that I just couldn't let go of. There was no predictable pattern to my choosing, but a sense that a particular cup or book or string of beads contained some of the sweetest memories. For all those, I found a place in the cupboards again. Then I cast aside the items that held no memories or promises anymore, into boxes for the Salvation Army or for friends with younger children. And I dwelled for a moment, on every decision that I made.

In the hallway I balanced the tray on one arm and knocked lightly on the door. I opened it without waiting for a reply. Abby was under the quilt. I'd bought the cover, printed with large frangipani flowers, when we redecorated the room for her tenth birthday. It matched the white furniture and purple walls, now covered with posters of pop stars and a pouting Keira Knightly, Abby's favourite actress. The flowers on the quilt had lost their intense colour. I wondered why I hadn't noticed its shabbiness before.

Abby's hair spread behind her on the pillow. She looked warily from under the sheet.

'I thought you might like breakfast in bed,' I said.

'O-*kay*,' she murmured with exaggerated suspicion. She sat up against the wall. Her feet neared the end of the bed. I placed the tray on her lap. Buttered toast, and a Milo. A hibiscus flower alongside the cup was already closing. Abby looked surprised.

'The picnic tray!' she said. Against the wall her curls gave her an odd halo. 'I haven't seen it in ages.'

At the foot of the bed I stooped to pick up a blouse from the floor. It was white and as slippery as water. It slid over my fingers onto the end of the bed. I wasn't expecting anything and didn't see Abby's face when she spoke.

'Thanks, Ma ... for the toast.'

When I looked she'd turned away again.

I hadn't gone back to bed until the early hours of the morning and now tiredness nagged at me, but I wasn't bothered by it. Abby's toes made small peaks under the quilt. I quickly pinched them. They didn't retract.

'You need a new bed. I could take you next week, if you want to go looking.' I glanced around the room. 'And maybe on the holidays we could freshen the walls up a bit.'

'Who'll pick the colour?' she asked.

'You, of course.'

Her eyes widened. I was pleased to see that in spite of her attempts at times to make me feel irrelevant, I could still surprise my daughter.

The pregnant woman boarded the train again. She walked towards me and I tried to catch her eye, thinking she might recognise me. She sat next to me and glanced, smiling politely. I nodded back. Her body spread outwards unapologetically. In several places her thigh, hip and elbow nudged me. I felt overshadowed. She wore a blue dress gathered at the neckline so that it ballooned over her body. There was a sense of resignation in her clothes that I pitied but understood. When Paul and Abby were babies clothes had meant little to me. I'd rarely felt that the world beyond me and the kids ever noticed me anyway. I'd felt most at home, secure even, in track suits and sandals. But I spend more money on clothes now, and I take more interest in how I look. I picked at miniscule beads of fabric on my beige pants.

The woman didn't have her mug today, but the book with the mother and child on the cover poked out from a side pocket of the bag at her feet. I sensed something was different about her, something subdued: a new discomfort perhaps? Maybe it was just tiredness. I knew that her cumbersome belly would both delight and torment her. My thoughts about her the day before seemed churlish to me now. Where she was heading was, after all, a place I'd once been. Outside the window, trees blurred past in flashes of light and dark. I wondered if I could enter that passage of early motherhood at this age, as she was about to. I doubted it. Motherhood is a one-way journey. I'd nearly gone back once, unplanned. No. A new baby now wouldn't be a welcome prospect. Beside me the woman was staring straight ahead. I smiled to myself. We were on different journeys, or at different stages on the same road, and mine no longer involved the exquisite illuminations and the embracing seclusion of babyhood.

I recalled that I'd seen all of my family that morning. Martin had brought me a cup of tea before he left for work. It was unexpected but very welcome after the late night I'd had. And Paul was up early for a change. Over breakfast he told me that his composition was finished, his face shining with a sense of his own brilliance. Abby had smiled gratefully when I took in her breakfast. Buoyed by these simple yet welcome gestures, I remembered that I still hadn't rung mum. I stroked the back of my hand. I hated the small, brown spots that were just appearing there. And yet I'd been struck last week at how freckled and loose the skin on mum's hands had become. I resolved to phone her as soon as I got to school. *Maybe I should take her out to a nice restaurant this year, just the two of us.*

The pregnant woman stood up for her stop and wove her way through the crowd to the door. She seemed more self-conscious than she had the day before, excusing herself and apologising when she bumped against someone else. And then I looked away, staring lazily through the window, and almost missed it. As the woman squeezed through the huddle of passengers waiting to board, I saw something shadowy, like a dove, flap to the ground at her feet. The platform cleared and there was her book, its marker on the paving beside it. Its brightly lettered cover blew open and shut in the breeze. She kept walking. I moved to the edge of my seat. While the train paused there was time for me to spring up and call to her through the doors, but I didn't. I felt suspended, as though she and I didn't share the same universe. It seemed that if I'd called to her she wouldn't have heard me. Although we were close in age, it seemed that years separated this stranger from me. Transfixed, I waited for someone else to see the

book and run after her as she walked slowly up the ramp to the overpass, cradling her belly in her hands. No one did.

The train began to move. Slouching back against the seat, I decided that it was just tough luck about the book. The woman would find out for herself that she'd lost it. Maybe she'd turn back for it. Maybe it wasn't important to her after all. As I travelled forward, my view of the woman on the overpass slipped away. The train hurtled through the suburb, and my thoughts turned again to the place I'd just left, as home after home flashed past the window.

Exegesis

Introduction ¹

Motherhood is an ordinary experience. Many women become mothers (biologically and/or socially) in their lives. All human beings are affected by motherhood, and a mother's experience, along their human journey. Yet, in spite of its ordinariness the occurrences of mother's stories in literature, in which the mother's voice or perspective is central, are limited. The mother has never been far away, but she is usually spoken for, about, and around. Rarely do we find stories about mothering that are primarily fuelled by what *mothers* do and think, how they feel about themselves and their relationships with their children and others. This exegesis explores the emergence of the mother's story within discourses around motherhood. It examines, briefly, the development of this perspective in the theoretical context as a prelude to a fuller discussion of the mother's story in fiction and non-fiction narratives. ²

The impetus for this research was triggered by personal experience. Throughout my childbearing years I couldn't read enough about pregnancy, childbirth and breastfeeding.

¹ Some sections of this exegesis have been reworked for an article, "Motherhood and the cave: A search for the mother's story", that has been submitted for peer review and publication to the journal, *Provoking Texts*, Curtin University, Perth, WA.

² While the term "story" may generate various connotations in different theoretical contexts, for the purposes of this exegesis, story refers to a written account of human experience with a narrative element, and includes both fiction and non-fiction. This use of the word seeks to avoid theoretical debate that may sidestep the core issue at stake here, that experiences of motherhood are underrepresented and that mothers have therefore been disadvantaged. Story may, of course, take other forms, such as song and film, but as this exegesis is primarily concerned with literature and creative writing, story is limited to prose narrative.

Reading assisted me through a remarkable period of my life, and deepened my understanding of what I was experiencing and what it meant to me. But beyond the baby years, the reality of the long-term impact of being responsible for children became more evident. The adjustments required to balance the demands of both family and individual needs often jar against the expectations many women have about their lives beyond motherhood. In trying to make these adjustments, I fulfilled the role of primary carer for my children for long stretches of time. Without a separate professional identity, I felt, at times, excluded from the social and conversational world beyond mothering circles. Although I knew I was discovering new things about myself and acquiring new skills every day, the significance of my growth as a woman did not seem recognised or valued. As I experienced both the painful aspects of this invisibility, and the freedom it gave me to explore this new world with my children, I felt literary sources adequate to my needs dry up. The abundance and quality of writing about mothering children beyond the baby years just wasn't at my fingertips. There was no shortage of parenting books (advice *to* mothers) but I tired of their self-assured tone and promises of success. It was much harder to find stories about the complex and ambiguous experiences of mothering, particularly beyond the stages of pregnancy and childbirth, exploring the way mothers feel about their work, their aspirations for themselves and sense of fulfilment.³

³ Brenda Daly and Maureen Reddy draw a distinction between the ability to give birth and the decision to care for children, which is a choice *separate* from biology, and open to those who give birth and those who do not. They believe this choice *defines* the act of mothering (1991, 3). In this exegesis, I frequently use the term "mothering" as a catch-all phrase for the active processes of bearing *and/or* caring for children.

This exegesis examines some of the reasons for the absence of mothers and their subjective voices in literature, asks questions about what such narratives might offer, and is guided by the following questions: What has been written about motherhood, and in what form? Does the mother's own narrative voice offer a unique perspective on our knowledge about motherhood? How can we approach both the reading and writing of motherhood in new ways that accommodate the complexity of this ordinary yet multifaceted experience? Some of the range of writing about motherhood—theory and non-fiction—is examined at the outset, but the particular focus is personal stories and narrative fiction. As a reader and creative writer I am interested in how stories assist both our articulation and understanding of human experience.

This work takes a feminist perspective, recognising there are areas of women's lives that remain neglected. Although feminism has undergone significant shifts over many decades, I resist the notion that we live in a post-feminist world.⁴ I agree with Rey Chow's claim that underpinning different feminist agendas, including contemporary ones, are the belief that the origins of women's oppression are social, and a commitment to naming and changing the social positions that reinforce that oppression (2003, 98). As motherhood is one aspect of women's lives that is undervalued and underrepresented in story, there is a need for continued investigations into the structures of society that may perpetuate this neglect through privileging public over private experience.

⁴ Juliet Mitchell, writing on feminism and psychoanalysis, grapples with this idea. She claims that today feminism is part of a natural discourse, and asks if it has been ideologically absorbed into the academy without being retained as a political movement (in Mary Eagleton, 2003, 1).

Any research that claims to locate a particular “experience” or “voice” (as this search for the mother’s story does) is problematic. Throughout this exegesis the words experience and representation are used frequently but guardedly. These terms seem unavoidable when attempting to define the specific content and themes compromising both the critical and creative components of this thesis. Mothers *do* experience mothering, in physical, emotional and intellectual ways. These experiences *are* subjective and *can* be shown (or represented) in story. But the empirical value of these experiences as universal has been widely contested. Post-structuralist theories question the autonomy of this *subject(ive)* experience, and show little interest in suggestions of “actual” or “lived” experiences that may purport to exist independent of language or ideology. This challenge, however, has been a site of opposition between post-structuralist feminists and their successors. For some, such as Nancy Hartsock, the challenge to subjecthood is problematic because it comes ‘just at the moment when so many of us who have been silenced begin to demand the right to name ourselves ...’ (in Chris Weedon, 2003, 128). Mothers are one group that have been silenced. To deny their right to speak of *their* experiences now seems incompatible with any theories of social justice. Is the compromise to find a balance between the post-structuralist lack of interest in lived subjectivity, and the necessity of subjecthood for enabling communication and action? Chris Weedon, in her work on subjecthood, proposes a definition that proves useful for my own purposes. Subjectivity, she suggests, refers to the conscious thoughts and feelings of the individual, her sense of self, that also encompasses unconscious meanings, wishes and desires (2003, 112). These are the very aspects of women’s lives that this thesis tries to explore both critically and through fiction. The term “lived

experience” serves in this context to distinguish motherhood as described by women who mother, from motherhood as it has been theorized (although the two are not necessarily mutually exclusive). And yet here I am cautioned, again, by Chow’s warning to women and minorities who think that when they are representing themselves they are liberating themselves from the powers that have traditionally subordinated and spoken/written for them. They may, she suggests, actually be ‘allowing such powers to work in the most effective way—from within their hearts and souls, in the form of voluntary, intimate confessions’ (2001, 46).

The difficulties that I encountered while writing the creative and critical components of this thesis certainly resonate with Chow’s comments. Frequently I have asked myself: how does a feminist write authentically about motherhood? ⁵ Many of my early mothering years were spent in the home, outside of paid work, financially supported by another person. At one level, this scenario is not dissimilar from the one my mother experienced, caring for her five children twenty-five years ago. And yet, unlike my mother, I benefited from more available childcare and greater opportunities to network locally with other mothers, to pursue other interests and part-time work. It is this contemporary experience of motherhood in the home, albeit western and middle-class, that I am compelled to explore through fiction. In the process I hope to convey some of its contradictions and restrictions but also much of the joy that some women do experience, while still acknowledging that available models of motherhood and family have not addressed all of the gender inequalities around childrearing to which feminism

⁵ Feminist researcher, Ann Snitow, claims that ‘*anyone* doing this work [writing about motherhood] is likely to worry about where to stand’ (1992, 32).

continues to draw attention. This research is not separable from the legacy of harsh questioning about motherhood that began in the 1960s with texts such as Betty Friedan's *The feminine mystique* (1963) and Shulamith Firestone's *The dialectic of sex: The case for feminist revolution* (1970), which claimed that women experienced unhappiness and lack of fulfilment in the narrow roles of housewife and mother that were imposed on them by patriarchy.⁶ Nor is this work divorced from the re-thinking of some of those conclusions by writers such as Adrienne Rich, in *Of woman born: motherhood as experience and institution* (1976) and Sara Ruddick, in 'Maternal thinking' (1980), which drew a distinction between the oppressive *institution* of motherhood, and the *experience* of bearing and caring for children, which some women were deeply committed to. This research is part of the continuation of study into one area of women's lives that remains a powerful force, whether they are mothers themselves or not.⁷

The reader will find that many of the theoretical and critical texts referred to in this exegesis were published during earlier decades. Feminist researcher, Ann Snitow, claims that the intellectual work of feminism had its renaissance in the late 1970s with works such as those mentioned above. But she believes that the political backlash of the 1980s caused much of the questioning of previously held assumptions about mothers and motherhood to lose its vitality, and she draws on the work of others to claim that the

⁶ Snitow describes these as "demon texts", which she claims have been apologised for and endlessly quoted out of context, to prove that the feminism of the early seventies was (quoting Friedan herself) "strangely blind" (1992, 35). But, she claims, those texts have been misread. *The dialectic of sex*, for instance, is an example of utopian writing, both reactive and rhetorical (1992, 36).

⁷ Peta Bowden, in her work on caring and gender, claims that women's lives are not exclusively dominated by their maternal potential, but that their biology does force a response, that 'mothering is a realm of potentiality to which all women are in some way accountable' (1997, 23).

‘word “family” was a grave in which the more autonomous word “woman” got buried’ (1992, 40). She describes this change as the loss of a voice that was ‘briefly on the defensive ... whatever its excesses or limitations’ (1992, 41). Andrea O’Reilly, on the other hand, in her research into feminism and motherhood, proposes that the topic of motherhood is more central than ever in women’s studies, but that the issues uncovered are more diverse, ambiguous and complex than earlier writers, like Rich, had understood them to be (in Sharon Abbey and Andrea O’Reilly, eds., 1998, 13). Certainly, in research for this thesis I encountered discussions on motherhood in contemporary scholarship that appear to be more dispersed across many disciplines. Therefore, in order to address the research questions posed at the beginning of this exegesis, it seemed necessary to return to some of the earlier feminist writing and pick up some of the discussions started there.

The mother’s story is this exegesis’s point of entry into that critical field, stemming from the belief that a society’s representation of human experience in story is one indication of how that society values that experience. The case for the importance of the mother’s story is developed over three chapters that explore the representation of motherhood in research, reading and writing, moving from a study of motherhood in existing theoretical, critical and narrative literature, towards implications for writers today trying to create new stories of motherhood.

Chapter 1, “Researching Motherhood”, briefly examines the theoretical context of writing about motherhood during the twentieth century, before moving on to explore the

emergence of the mother's story. Rich's *Of woman born* is cited as a landmark text that situated the mother's story within the critical field of motherhood. The development of the mother's story, particularly through the mother's voice, in scholarly writing from that point to the present is further discussed. Mention is made of fictocriticism which has become a popular strategy for combining elements of fictional narrative within critical discourses. Possible reasons for the paucity of stories about mothers and motherhood, outside of academic discourse, are also discussed.

Chapter 2, "Reading Motherhood", explores the contemporary narrative terrain of motherhood, starting with memoirs by Rachel Cusk and Anne Enright. These women were both established fiction writers before becoming mothers. The move into non-fiction to write about their mothering experiences is viewed as a deliberate choice which suggests that writers are experimenting with new frameworks for reflecting on motherhood. Women who are writing about motherhood today are navigating their way through a foreign country, where the traditional boundaries between fiction and non-fiction are often blurred to accommodate the complexities they have discovered in the mothering experience.

In this chapter "the cave" is offered as a metaphor that may be effective when reading and writing motherhood. In western traditions the cave has negative associations with restriction and ignorance, but in spiritual discourses the cave is often viewed as a place of stillness that, although confining, can offer the inhabitant opportunities for greater self-reflection and self-awareness. Similarly, motherhood, which for some women can

be a limiting experience, may also provide opportunities for unprecedented personal growth. The cave, as a metaphor, is capable of holding both ambiguity and complexity. Within this framework the notion that modern women, with the benefits of a feminist consciousness and new opportunities, may still find themselves in traditional roles as mothers and homemakers does not seem inconsistent. This chapter demonstrates the application of this alternative reading of the cave to a contemporary mothering narrative.

Chapter 3, “Writing Motherhood”, examines some of the issues that may be encountered when writing about motherhood. For example, there is the risk of being misunderstood, of appearing reactionary by dwelling on situations where mothers are portrayed in traditional roles. There is the ever-present fear of making essentialist and universalist claims when discussing women’s experiences. At the same time, care must be taken that this fear does not further silence women. The difficulty of finding the correct balance between ideas and story is discussed. While an idea (such as motherhood and the cave) may guide a fiction writer and frame a story, it cannot be allowed to burden the narrative with polemic. It is essential that readers have the space to form personal responses to a story, however far those responses diverge from the writer’s aims.

In casting my net as widely as possible in search of the mother’s story, I have drawn on a range of texts, including scholarly research, journalism, popular writing, and narratives constituting both memoir and fiction. It also seemed most appropriate, given the nature of the research questions, and the scope of this exegesis, to offer a broad overview of this archive, rather than to focus on just one or two texts. And yet I acknowledge that the

findings here are limited. This exegesis is not an exhaustive study of the full scope of writing on motherhood. In the creative component of this thesis, motherhood is represented as an experience of caring for small children in the home, and the texts drawn on in this exegesis reflect western, middle-class contexts. As mentioned above, the impetus for this research was born out of what I encountered as a mother. This exegesis recognises that motherhood takes many forms and impacts on women and families in vastly different ways, and supports women's rights to make their own decisions about their children's care as they negotiate that very fine balance between individual and shared needs. There is a great need for many more stories representing diverse expressions of mothering experiences, from all racial and cultural perspectives, and all social configurations.

Chapter 1

Researching Motherhood

Writing about motherhood is not a new endeavour. Throughout the twentieth century a wealth of writing was produced concerning the nature of motherhood and the qualities that comprised “good” mothering. This chapter begins with a brief overview of this theoretical and critical archive, citing some of the key researchers and texts exploring this subject from a range of perspectives.¹ But the focus is the mother’s story as a source of knowledge and understanding about motherhood. This chapter proposes that Adrienne Rich’s 1976 text, *Of woman born: Motherhood as institution and experience*, can be viewed as a significant event in the history of motherhood discourses, because its inclusion of personal experience in critical study widened the possibilities for thinking and writing about motherhood. The legacy of this text, both praise and criticism of it, is discussed. Reference is also made to fictocriticism, a strategy for writing that evolved out of the questioning of the limits of conventional discursive boundaries. Developing the argument, outlined in the introduction, that the mother’s story, in fiction and non-fiction, is still undervalued and underrepresented, this chapter explores possible reasons for this oversight, concluding that the mother’s subjective experience should be available as an alternative representation of motherhood.

¹ The texts drawn on, from a range of disciplines, including psychology, sociology and literature, are not an exhaustive list of the writing on motherhood. They have, however, been selected based on their relevance to this thesis’s focus on the importance of stories about motherhood.

Motherhood and theory

Mary Boulton, a sociologist who has researched the experiences of women with young children, concluded that the different theoretical viewpoints on motherhood that evolved over the twentieth century could be crudely divided into two opposing camps, incorporating those who saw motherhood as natural, and those who saw it as a trap (1983, 2). Although at one level simplistic, this idea is a useful starting point from which to argue that story may offer a more complex and nuanced approach to representing and understanding motherhood.

Viewpoints that see motherhood as natural are often intent on defining the “unique” factors (predominantly psychological and biological) that cause women to become, and to act, as mothers. Some psychoanalytic theorists, such as Alice Balint (1949), Helen Deutsch (1945) and Donald Winnicott (1975), argue that women are innately driven to mother, that motherliness is a natural characteristic of healthy, mature women, and that mothering is naturally rewarding for women.² Any dissatisfaction in mothering is viewed as the cause of developmental problems in women’s psychosexual development. Penelope Leach, a psychologist who has written extensively about parenting, popularised the view that mothers find caring for their children naturally rewarding because of strong bonds of love that exist between a mother and her children (1979, 91).

² Boulton describes these as the ‘classic’ writers in psychoanalytic theory, as opposed to later feminist writers in the psychoanalytical school, such as Nancy Chodorow (1978), who disagree with the innate or instinctual view of mothering.

Here again, a woman's inability to find motherhood fully rewarding implies some fault on her part, in this case, her failure to bond successfully with her children.

Alongside these arguments are those in the opposing camp, socially based theories that question assumptions that women are biologically determined to mother, and that argue instead that social institutions are constructed to meet human needs, and in turn to shape human behaviour. Thus, the *structures* of society, at least in part, determine a woman's relationship with her children and influence her experiences as a mother (Boulton, 1983, 16). Feminist theorists of the 1960s and 1970s situated motherhood in historical, socio-political frameworks, which viewed the institution of motherhood as a tool protecting male power and privilege at the expense of women's self-determination. Along with Friedan, Firestone and Ruddick, whose contributions are acknowledged in the introduction to this exegesis, Ann Oakley and Nancy Chodorow are key figures in this field.³ Feminist sociologist Oakley, in *Woman's work: The housewife, past and present* (1974), describes the contemporary view of motherhood as a myth based on false beliefs that women needed to be mothers and that children needed their mothers. In *The reproduction of mothering: Psychoanalysis and the sociology of gender* (1978), Chodorow, using psychoanalytic object relations theory, claims that women are conditioned to be mothers by the act of having *been* mothered. It is the girl's continuous attachment to and identification with her mothers that orients her towards nurturance and care.

³ Betty Friedan (1963) *The feminine mystique*; Shulamith Firestone (1970) *The dialectic of sex*; Sara Ruddick (1980) 'Maternal thinking'.

This brief overview illustrates the dualistic approach to the study of motherhood that Boulton argues has created a view of motherhood that is couched in polemic terms:

On the one hand, 'everyone knows' that it is 'depressing' to stay at home with young children. On the other hand, 'everyone knows' that children are 'naturally rewarding' to their mothers. It is hardly surprising, then, that the nature of women's experiences as mothers is the subject of vociferous debate (1983, 2).

Story may assist us in navigating an authentic and meaningful path between these opposite stances. Women's subjective experiences of mothering are surely valuable sources of knowledge about what motherhood is and what it means to women. But subjective experience has not always been accepted as a credible source of knowledge about motherhood, either in the academy, or in popular literature.⁴

The mother's silence

Earlier scholarly research has suggested that this lack in the theoretical and literary archives is very real. Feminist theologian, Carol Christ, in her study of women's stories thirty years ago, claimed that:

Women's stories have not been told. And without stories there is no articulation of experience. Without stories a woman is lost when she comes to make the important decisions of her life. She does not learn to value her struggles, to celebrate her strengths, to comprehend her pain. Without stories, she cannot understand herself (1980, 1).

⁴ Brenda Daly and Maureen Reddy argue that much greater attention needs to be given to mothers' subjective experiences, which often disappears in even the most sensitive of feminist discussions of mothering. They claim that even influential works by writers such as Nancy Chodorow, Dorothy Dinnerstein and Carol Gilligan are 'daughter-centric', concerned more with the effects of current conditions of mothering on child development than on mothers themselves (1991, 1-2).

E. Ann Kaplan, in her work on motherhood and representation in North American popular culture between 1830 and 1960, also claims that the mother has generally been viewed as an *object* to be discussed; as a *subject* in her own right, she has been neglected. The mother, she argues, was usually in the margins, figuring in the story of another. If she was in focus, she was ‘the brunt of an attack, a criticism, a complaint, usually in the discourse of a child’ (1992, 3). And Heather Ingman’s study of women’s writing between the wars reached similar conclusions. She found that opportunities for education and economic independence improved for some women (predominantly middle-class and unmarried) after the First World War. But the situation of women in the home and mothers did not greatly improve, causing a ‘rupture in women’s history’ (1998, 20).⁵ With more freedom of movement, and an acceptance that single women could earn their own living, daughters were no longer destined to repeat their mother’s lives. Ingman claims that these factors contributed to an increase in the fictional treatment of women. However, while women began telling their stories in earnest, very often the mother remained a secondary focus of someone else’s story, in this case, *the daughter’s* (1998, 20; my emphasis).⁶ The mother, in a different position socially and economically, without the benefits of her daughter’s education, remained silenced. The silence around this significant aspect of women’s lives devalues mothering experiences as worthy material for stories, and the mother’s voice as a unique perspective on

⁵ A shortage of domestic help (which middle-class mothers had previously relied upon) and the ‘cult of domesticity’ further increased psychological pressure on women to raise standards in housework and cleanliness. And, although mortality rates in general fell rapidly, maternal mortality actually rose from the end of the First World War until 1934 (Ingman, 1998, 14-17).

⁶ Ingman also credits this emergence of women’s stories with the considerable impact made by women on psychoanalysis during the inter-war period. In Britain, by 1940, forty per cent of analysts were women. She names Helene Deutsch, Karen Honey, Anna Freud and Melanie Klein as the four ‘founding mothers’ of psychoanalysis. It was their re-working of Freud’s phallogocentric theories of female development into mother-centred psychoanalysis and maternal sources of women’s sexuality that allowed women to explore new themes in their writing (1998, 24).

motherhood. Further, women are denied stories about motherhood as sources of reflection, connection to others, and enjoyment.

Elaine Tuttle Hansen, however, is one researcher who disagrees. In her book, *Mother without child: Contemporary fiction and the crisis of motherhood* (1997), she claims that a wealth of fiction, written in the thirty years preceding her study, has centred on the mother, arguing that within this archive is to be found the ‘rigorous, daring and potentially empowering’ discourses around motherhood that some feminist scholars have called for (1997, 10). Some of Hansen’s claims and those made in this exegesis concur. Story can enrich the discourses and fill the silences around motherhood. But Hansen’s archive is a collection of stories that feature women separated, in some way, from the children they have, or may have had. These are stories of loss, during pregnancy and after. Hansen admits too that the stories she draws on often feature the unusual, “‘bad” mothers ... sometimes criminals, murderers, prisoners, suicides, time travellers, tricksters, or ghosts’ (1997, 10). By contrast, the focus of this exegesis is on the ordinary, mundane experiences of mothers as they interact with their children and the situations that motherhood places them in. The argument thus stands that, while women may feature more strongly in texts than they used to, one is still hard pushed to find stories about ordinary representations of motherhood.⁷

⁷ A browse of the Internet reveals that this silence is widely felt in popular culture. Dedicated “Mother blogs” or “Momoirs” are being used by women to share day-to-day experiences of mothering. Although I am unable to explore this medium fully in this exegesis, its significance cannot be ignored. On one site, a blog on writing and motherhood, previously published author, asha dornfest, confesses: ‘I am unlikely to buy more than one or two books in which women describe their angsty transition from happy-go-lucky gal to mother ... I’ve been there, and I’m ready to read something that will open my eyes to the road ahead, which for me, remains shrouded in mystery’ (2005, n.p.). Another published author, Andrea Buchanan, claims in her blog that the publishing industry has disregarded the market value of literature about motherhood and the buying power of mothers. She asks ‘what is a mother to do when the writing she

Breaking the silence—*Of woman born*

As often quoted in motherhood literature as *Of woman born* is, I cite it here because the narrative embedded in the text broke through the mother's silence in theoretical discourses and is thus central to the argument at hand. With this text, Rich established new ground in motherhood discourses by distinguishing between two different meanings of motherhood, 'one superimposed on the other: the *potential relationship* of any woman to her powers of reproduction and to children; and the *institution*, which aims at ensuring that that potential—and all women—shall remain under male control' (1976, 13). Like other feminist writers, Rich questioned the assumptions that a "natural" mother is a person without further identity' (1976, 22), and that 'nurturance' was a special and inherent strength of women (1976, 283), but she also writes powerfully, throughout, about the creativity and increased knowledge of oneself that motherhood can engender.

As valuable as Rich's ideas about motherhood were, it was the way in which she expressed them that makes the text so significant. Early in the text, Rich states that 'it seemed impossible from the first to write a book of this kind without being often autobiographical, without often saying "I"' (1976, 15). As a result, *Of woman born* weaves personal experience and theory together. It is the narrative, indeed Rich's own

wants to read isn't there? When the only discussion about maternal ambivalence is the one in the glossy magazine about whether to get the Bugaboo or the Frog stroller?' (2006, n.p.). She argues that the proliferation of shared experience on the Internet is a sign that mothers are turning to literature (even creating it) to 'make sense of the secret world we have discovered, where it turns out, in fact, that we can't have it all and do it all ... real mothers struggling to create a narrative out of the often disjointed, complex, and simultaneously occurring events of their lives' (n.p.).

narrative—as a woman, an artist, a daughter, a wife and a mother—drawing on anecdote and memoir, that connects the historical, anthropological, psychological and literary threads of the book. In the opening chapter, “Anger and tenderness”, Rich quotes from several pages of her own journals, offering the reader an insight into her most private feelings about her children, and her role as a mother:

My children cause me the most exquisite suffering of which I have any experience. It is the suffering of ambivalence: the murderous alternation between bitter resentment and raw-edged nerves, and blissful gratification and tenderness (1976, 21).⁸

This is a courageous opening for any study of motherhood, exposing the myth that mothers are a constant and continual source of selfless love and patience in relation to their children, *at all times*, while using *herself* (Rich) as the subject example for this ambivalence. It is the narrative quality of the text that held me as a reader when I first read *Of woman born* as a university student twenty years ago, and before I had become a mother myself. The personal story engages the reader, and makes a powerful statement about the place of personal experience in critical thought. Rich’s own story is integral to the text; her argument would not be the same, or have had the same impact, without it.

O’Reilly concurs that the narrative element in *Of woman born* holds together the dualistic divide between different views of motherhood. She claims that Rich provided the analytical *tools* to study and report on motherhood by allowing scholars to focus

⁸ Rich’s term ‘murderous alternation’ is echoed in Anne Enright’s article “Diary”. In her reflection on the public scrutiny of the McCanns during the investigation into their daughter’s disappearance, Enright remarks that ‘I am more afraid of murdering my children than I am of losing them to a random act of abduction ... despite the fact that I am one of the most dangerous people my children know, I keep them close by me’ (Enright, 2007, n.p.).

their discussion on the oppressive nature of the institution that was male-defined, without denying that, as an experience, mothering can be a source of power for women (2004, 2). The dual use of theory and experience, she argues, privileges subjective knowledge and blends and blurs the conventional oppositions of theory and experience (2004, 3).⁹

Though highly acclaimed, *Of woman born* has attracted some accusations of essentialism. Rachel Blau DuPlessis, poet and feminist critic, in an early review of the text, warns against aspects of Rich's argument that appear to be trying to reach the essence of woman that was beyond conflict, 'the place where all women necessarily meet, the essence of woman, pure blood ...' (1978, 11). But Ann Keniston, scholar and poet, counters criticisms like these by claiming that the personal account of motherhood in *Of woman born* counteracts any tendency to essentialism that arises from the historical account of motherhood as an institution, and that it is precisely this mixing of autobiography and history that *rescues* the text from reductive readings (2004, 230).

While some aspects of Rich's arguments may still cause discomfort for some readers, there is no doubt that the text opened the way for new approaches to the study of motherhood. As creative writer and critic, Margaret Atwood (who, Like DuPlessis,

⁹ Boulton, for instance, demonstrates good use of such "tools", by including the way women *experience* motherhood in her research (1983, 53). Her study of women with pre-school children involved fifty women and sought to gauge their feelings about motherhood. Participants conveyed how they felt while they were looking after their children (immediate response) and the meaningfulness they described about their role as mothers (sense of purpose). More recently, Tina Miller, using narrative theory methodologies, interviewed seventeen women at three separate intervals over the course of the year they became mothers. She found that the collected narratives were multi-layered, comprising public, private and personal threads, and that these accounts revealed that becoming a mother caused a shifting sense of self that participants struggled to accommodate through different strategies in narrating their experiences (2005, 25).

reviewed the text in 1976) says, ‘... it was not Rich’s intention to write a flawless book or a popular one; rather, she wished to open a dialogue, a dialogue which must be pursued’ (1982, 257).

Scholars such as Kaplan (1992), O’Reilly (2004), Keniston (2004), and Miller (2005) have pursued that dialogue, and followed Rich’s example by deliberately and explicitly including their own experiences as mothers in their critical discussions on motherhood. In each of these instances, the mother’s story is used to contextualize the scholarly discourses that follow, but the passages of “subjective” and “objective” enquiry (what Keniston calls the “confessional” and “scholarly” voices’ (2004, 224)) remain clearly distinct. However, in the last few decades some scholars and creative writers have questioned traditional separations between different forms of knowledge and expression. Forms of writing have emerged that more overtly blend fiction, theory and criticism together into a more fluid, single text. Distinctly post-modern, fictocriticism is recognised by its greater concern with self-reflexivity, intertextuality, and a playful approach to narrative boundaries. Amanda Nettlebeck, an English scholar, defines fictocriticism as a hybridized writing that moves between the poles of ‘fiction (‘invention’/‘speculation’) and criticism (‘deduction’/‘explication’), of subjectivity (‘interiority’) and objectivity (‘exteriority’)’ (in Heather Kerr and Nettlebeck, 1998, 4). And writing scholar, Anna Gibbs, describes it as a writing that questions the authority of academic discourse and its function as ‘the voice of the dead stalking the present’ (2005, n.p.). She claims that feminist writers in particular have sought other relationships to disciplinary academic authority than those of ‘simple submission and unthinking repetition’ (2005, n.p.).

Jeannette Weeda-Zuidersma is one writer who has sought a “new relationship” by incorporating fiction in her PhD thesis, ‘Keeping mum: Representations of motherhood in contemporary Australian literature—a fictocritical approach’ (2006). Also concerned with the underrepresentation of mother’s subjective experiences in narrative, she claims that the inclusion of story in her thesis is an ‘attempt to vocalise aspects of mothering that, given their complexity, consumption of time and impact on human lives, have been disproportionately unvocalised’ (2006, 26). The result, “Catherine’s story”, gives an “insider’s” voice alongside the critical aspects of the thesis.

While fictocriticism has gained increasing acceptance as a credible form of both creative and critical work, this exegesis asks how prevalent the mother’s story, independent of scholarly comment, is. French feminists, Hélène Cixous and Julia Kristeva, explored this question in the 1970s and 1980s. In ‘The Laugh of the Medusa’ (1976) Cixous proposes the notion of a feminine writing practice, *l’écriture féminine*, which she claims takes place outside of areas that are regulated and subordinated by patriarchally defined language systems. While feminist discourses have moved away from the potentially essentialist undertones of Cixous’ conclusions, and are sceptical of any claim to unconstrained human experience, Cixous’ questions may still be relevant at this time when mother’s stories are still few and far between. ‘Can a mother write as a mother?’ she asks. ‘Do we have mothers writing? Why doesn’t a mother write as a mother? The sacrifice of the mother—the silence of the mother’ (1990, 24). By extension, in her

essay, 'Woman's Time', Kristeva challenges feminism to address that which does not go away, the desire for motherhood:

... we have seen in recent years an increasing number of women who not only consider their maternity compatible with their professional life or their feminist involvement ... but also find it indispensable to their discovery, not of the plenitude, but of the complexity of the female experience, with all that this complexity comprises in joy and pain (1986, 205).

Contemporary research concurs that, in spite of feminist awareness of the oppressive nature of the institution of motherhood, and opportunities that provide alternative choices for some women, most will still become mothers. Many will forestall or interrupt careers to do so (forgoing a personal income) and will take on the bulk of child care duties (Boyd, 2000, 9; ABS, 2008, n.p.). Feminists have worked tirelessly to assert that mothers are not *just* mothers, but have separate identities outside of their mothering roles. This is unquestionably important. But some women *are* mothers too, and any discourse does mothers a disservice if it shies away from acknowledging their ordinary yet multifaceted experiences.

Breaking the silence—beyond the academy

And yet, in spite of the significance of these experiences for many women, there is a paucity of stories that centre the *mother's* concerns and viewpoints at the heart of them, or in which the conflict in the story springs from the relationships between the mother and her children, or from her own developing sense of self. The absence of the mother's voice in story may suggest a perceived lack of interest by readers of fiction and non-fiction narratives in the mother's experience, or indicate the low value society places on

mother's work. Daly and Reddy believe that conventional prose narratives, such as autobiography and the novel, are ideal avenues for telling stories of mothering, but that resistance is met from readers who have been taught 'to read as men and who expect to be told "classic" tales of adventure and romance' (1991, 10). Boulton's research into mother's experiences certainly uncovered a perceived lack of interest in their lives. She remarks that:

The work of childrearing goes unrecognised by society which neither pays wages for it nor gives it due social recognition and respect: a woman who has spent ten years raising three children, for example, is considered to have no qualification for a 'job' and no 'work' experience' (1983, 22).

Today, it appears that we have come a long way in recognising women's achievements in the public, professional realm, but there is still a silence around their unpaid work in the private sphere. For instance Suzanne Fields, a columnist with the *Washington Times*, when interviewed by a journalist preparing her mother's obituary, found that the writer wasn't interested in her mother's role as a homemaker, but pushed for details of other, apparently more worthy achievements:

"What did she do for the neighbourhood, the community, the city?" I half expected her to add, "... the world?"
"She raised her family," I said. "She was a full-time mother, devoted grandmother, loving great-grandmother. She wrapped her extended family in hand-knitted sweaters, covered their beds with beautiful crocheted quilts and baked favourite chocolate cake for their birthdays. She made it possible for her children with more ambitious careers to leave their own children in her care when they left town on business ..."
The reporter wasn't interested in any of this and focussed only on her volunteer work for various charities (2002, n.p.).

Fields takes issue with modern feminism that has replaced one cultural doctrine (that kept women *in* the home) with another, that measures a woman's worth only by what she does *outside* the home. She writes this column to reclaim "the last word", to break the silence and honour her mother's life.

Is it possible that mother's lives are undervalued because we still know so little about what a mother does and how she feels? Rich claimed that 'we know more about the air we breathe, the seas we travel, than about the nature and meaning of motherhood' (1976, 11). Susan Maushart, a sociologist who has written extensively about motherhood as both a researcher in the academy and as a columnist with *The Australian*, claims that motherhood has proved to be far more complex than we had imagined. She suggests that 'for individual women the private experience of motherhood ... [is] ... infinitely more profound and meaningful, more joyous and transcendent, yet more vexed and ambivalent, more downright dangerous, than we have yet dared to voice' (1997, 315). It is dangerous because there is no tradition of talking about our mothering in a way that exposes our vulnerabilities and contradictions, or revealing anything less than our undying love for our children. Maushart calls the collective denial of ambiguity and complexity in the experience of motherhood a *mask* that prevents (and protects) us from fully understanding this aspect of women's lives.¹⁰

¹⁰ In a survey of post-partum mothers, conducted with funding from the Victorian Health Promotion Foundation, one woman, in response to the question 'how would you describe a *good* mother', replied 'patient, always there ... caring, loving, can do ten things at once ... knows how to put two kids on one lap' (Stephanie Brown, Judith Lumley, Rhonda Small, and Jill Astbury, 1994, 139). To speak of mothering in ways that suggests something else—that for instance, mothers are not always patient, and are sometimes angry and even cruel—is an act of, in Maushart's words, *unmasking* motherhood.

Jill Dawson and Margo Daly, editors of a literary anthology on pregnancy and birth, *Gas and air: Tales of pregnancy and beyond* (2002), have attempted to “unmask” some aspects of motherhood. Dawson claims that literature has copulation and death pretty well covered, but has traditionally ignored pregnancy and birth (2002, 1). However, she believes that technological advances that provide “windows into the womb” and the modern trend to include men in the birthing experience is breaking down the final taboos surrounding these most ‘female’ of experiences (2002, 2). Many of the stories (memoir and fiction) in this anthology *are* rich explorations of the complex emotions parents can feel, and they capture the reader’s interest and hold it until the end, but the topics are limited to pregnancy and birth. Birth is about extremes—pain, fear, triumph, life and death itself—and, as Dawson suggests, it is increasingly a subject that men can write about from personal experience. But we still have some way to go before the same quality and quantity of narratives are available that portray mothering as an occupation for life, revealing some of the implications for negotiation of individual rights and shared intimacy that accompany any long-term relationship. If we stop at birth, we miss so much of the story.

I would argue that the mother’s subjective experiences should be spoken and heard and the conventional, male-defined stronghold on narrative content and style must be loosened to allow other stories in. The next chapter offers an overview of stories on motherhood, in memoir and fiction. The decisions by some established fiction writers to write about their experiences of mothering in memoir, suggesting a movement away from conventional divisions between genres and writers, subjects and objects, is

explored. The examples given are frank, provocative accounts of complex journeys and show us how powerful personal stories can be. But fiction too offers another avenue through which we can explore human experience, and broaden our understanding of this aspect of women's lives; thus the possibilities for exploring motherhood through fiction are also discussed.

Returning to Boulton's two camps—those who view motherhood as a trap, and those who view it as natural—we may need to ask if the time has come for fresh perspectives, ones that can accommodate less certainty, and the possibility of contradictory claims. Story, in memoir and fiction, can help to explore the very grey landscape in between, where women are negotiating their own sense of identity and self-determination as mothers.

Chapter 2

Reading Motherhood

As a reader I am drawn to stories about mothers that explore the complexity of their feelings about their role as mothers and the work that role entails, and the struggle to preserve a sense of self in the face of conflicting ideologies and the lived realities of motherhood. I am interested in what mothers, real or imagined, have to say.

This chapter explores narratives about mothering—in memoir and fiction—that reveal a growing interest in the mother’s story. What emerges from these texts is a sense that motherhood cannot be explained by any one ideology because the diversity of individual experiences cannot be contained within the boundaries of theory alone. Among the writers mentioned are some who have stepped out of their usual medium of fiction and have used memoir to write about becoming mothers. Some possibilities for this decision are suggested. This chapter also unpacks the concept of “the cave” as a metaphor for motherhood, and demonstrates its application to the reading of a novel. The discussion concludes by arguing that an idea, such as motherhood and the cave, may at times be more useful than ideologies about the nature of motherhood, in enabling us to listen to the mother’s story. As a metaphor, the cave can accommodate the complexity and ambiguity so often expressed by mothers when trying to articulate the details of their lives.

Motherhood and memoir

Two memoirs, *A life's work: On becoming a mother* by Rachel Cusk (2008), and *Making babies: Stumbling into motherhood* by Anne Enright (2004), represent new ways of narrating motherhood that confront the complexity of the experience, addressing the challenges to independence and self-identity that mothers face, without shying away from celebrating the joyous, transformative aspects of intimate involvement in the bearing and raising of children.¹ The public reception of these memoirs, however, reveals that as a society, we are still struggling with long-held assumptions about mothers and motherhood, and that the processes of “unmasking” motherhood, as Maushart advocates, are still evolving (1997).

After *A life's work* was first published in 2001, Cusk received such mixed feedback from readers that she was prompted to write a new introduction to the second edition, released in 2008. In it she admits that she was unprepared for the criticism her book initially provoked, believing that motherhood was a topic that would not attract much interest. Perhaps some readers hadn't expected to hear a mother admit things like: ‘I arrived at the fact of motherhood shocked and unprepared ... longing for some lost, pre-maternal self, and for the freedom that self had enjoyed, perhaps squandered’ (2008, 8), and the surprise of such admissions prompted some accusations that Cusk was an unfit

¹ *A life's work* was first published in 2001, and again in 2008. It is the latter publication that I draw on in this exegesis, with particular interest in Cusk's reflections in the new introduction.

and unloving mother.² In defending her decision to write about motherhood from a personal perspective, Cusk says that ‘... the experience of ambivalence that characterises the early stages of parenthood seemed to me to be both kith and kin of the writer’s fundamental ambivalence towards life ...’ (2008, 4). While she admits that she was disturbed by some of the criticisms that questioned her love for her children, she found that, when preparing the second edition, she stood by her original words, and found in them both threads of ambivalence and gratitude. Likening her book to an old dusty violin, she says: ‘How pleasant then, to draw the bow across and discover that its notes still sound true to me, its music sincere, its core of love undamaged’ (2008, 6).

Following Cusk a few years later, and no doubt aware of the way her peer’s work had been received, Enright pre-empted anticipated criticism for her book, *Making babies*, with the blunt statement: ‘I’d like to say sorry to everyone in advance. Sorry. Sorry. Sorry. Sorry’ (2004, 1). Enright addresses, at the outset, the perception that ‘mothers just shouldn’t [think]’ or at least not be selfish enough to air their thoughts (2004, 1). She also spells out how she managed to write the book at all, detailing the work and childcare arrangements she used to ensure writing time (2004, 3). This implicitly answers criticisms that are often raised against women who manage other achievements as well as parenting.³ And like Cusk, Enright dwells, often fondly, on many of the

² In an article in *The Guardian*, Cusk says that amongst the criticism levelled against her she was ‘accused of child-hating, of postnatal depression, of shameless greed, of irresponsibility, of pretentiousness, of selfishness, of doom-mongering and, most often, of being too intellectual’ (2008, n.p.).

³ Cusk addresses this issue too, commenting that friends and family expressed genuine concern for her husband, and the interruption to *his* career, when he gave up his job to look after his daughter while Cusk wrote her book (2008, 13).

ordinary experiences of day-to-day life caring for children that many mothers, and fathers, would recognise, while also writing with raw honesty about the challenges:

It comes on you in a rush with the first baby—the unfairness of it. You become blind with a fury that is not quite your own ... You are furious because you know that the weight of it is against you; you have to fight for every half-hour that a man will just assume (2004, 155).

Comparing Cusk and Enright's memoirs in a review for *The Observer*, journalist

Vanessa Thorpe asks,

Is it then just women of letters, and of a certain income, like Enright and Cusk, who have the luxury of such a complex reaction to motherhood? Possibly so, but there is no denying that although more women give birth now in later life, in a considered, responsible way, they still find themselves surprised by the event (2004, n.p.).

While Thorpe's question is valid, these memoirs are important because they engage with the surprise: they work to "unmask" motherhood and question assumptions around it, while also acknowledging the transformation that some women experience as mothers. They go some way to bridging the gap that Boulton describes, as mentioned in the previous chapter, between those who view motherhood as natural, and those who view it as a trap. Cusk and Enright may be trying to say both: that available models of how we bear and raise children are far from perfect and place unequal restrictions on men and women, but that motherhood can also facilitate unique opportunities for personal growth. Enright says; 'on the plus side—a family, a marriage, this deliberate happiness. I sit in my garden and am profoundly grateful (2004, 195).

Though undeniably creative and sometimes lyrical in style, drawing attention to the way writers, like other artists, make interesting and symbolic connections between their experiences and the world around them, these texts are also autobiographical. The reader must assume that the decisions to place themselves in the story were important for Cusk and Enright. Given both writers had well established careers as novelists prior to becoming mothers, their choices to write about motherhood in memoir is interesting. Tina Miller's research into women's experiences as mothers suggests possible reasons for these choices. Miller claims that becoming a mother is a complicated experience involving physical and emotional challenges that will most often leave a woman with a baby that she will feel responsible for. This experience is, she says, a major life event which is potentially disruptive to the woman's sense of self and leads to 'biographical disruption' (2005, 19). Miller argues that, as natural story-tellers, people use narratives to help them understand what has happened to them; to make sense of the relationships between the events and choices of their lives. Cusk and Enright's texts may reflect this attempt to make sense of the intensely personal and disruptive events of childbirth and early motherhood, especially because the medium assumes a certain basis of "truth". In memoir, the author arguably has more "ownership" of the experience because there is less distance between author and narrator than is assumed in fiction.⁴

But there is also evidence in contemporary writing that that the distinction between "real" and "not real" is becoming less obvious, and less important. Autobiographers

⁴ James Goodwin draws on Phillippe Lejeune's theories on autobiography to illustrate this distinction. For Lejeune, a pact between an autobiography and the reader, initiated from the attribution of authorship on the title page, causes the reader to assume the same identity shared between the author, narrator and protagonist, and to apply different standards in their reading of the text than they would to fiction (1993, 15-16).

have commonly used techniques usually associated with the novel to shape personal experience, but the categorical distinction between the two genres of autobiography and fiction has traditionally been clear (Liz Stanley, 1992; James Goodwin, 1993). What may be becoming more common however is the clarity and importance of that distinction. Many writers are choosing to draw more obviously on actual incidents in life (theirs or others' lives), communicate those events through creative techniques, and produce writing that cannot be easily categorized. Daly and Reddy, writing about mothers as narrators, claim that women novelists are employing postmodern strategies to break down conventional limitations, producing writing that conveys fluid boundaries between public and private, mothers and daughters, past and present, myth and history (1991, 9). Lidia Curti, in her work on narrative and identity, concurs, remarking that these contemporary narratives arise from hybrid voices that move on 'the border between memory and fantasy, fable and history, poetry and prose' (1998, xi), and she cites fiction writer Louise Erdrich as one such hybrid voice. Erdrich's *The blue jay's dance: A birth year* (1996) is an imaginative condensation into one tale of the author's experiences of giving birth to her three daughters. The text reads like a meditation on pregnancy and birth, family life and writing. The lack of clarity about which child is being referred to at any moment, or whether or not a particular event is real or imagined, seems superfluous to the power the story commands. Similarly, Dawson and Daly, in the anthology *Gas and air* already mentioned, do not indicate which of the stories are fiction and which are autobiographical, suggesting that a blurring of boundaries between fiction and memoir seem particularly suited to the subject matter. By not categorizing

the stories, the editors hope to open, rather than close, possible interpretations of the tales (2002, 4).

Cusk advises readers, in the second edition of her memoir, to remember that fiction and non-fiction are not entirely distinct forms, remarking that ‘Whether a thing is called fiction or fact has no particular bearing on the chisel and the block of stone, on the pursuit of truth and beauty, even on the task of fabrication itself’ (2008, 1). Both fiction and non-fiction are constructed texts and creative works, and care should be taken when drawing conclusions about the author from the text.⁵ As writers continue to experiment with form, we will surely see greater blurring of the boundaries between genres, which seems particularly fitting when writing about life experiences that can be emotionally confronting and joyous at the same time. But new language, fresh metaphors for mothering experiences may also open the possibilities for how we write and read about motherhood.

Motherhood and “the cave”

Sometimes a new framework, like a new pair of glasses, can make sense of what mothers are saying in their stories. An idea, a notion of something else, rather than an ideology to which one feels some responsibility to account to, may be more helpful in

⁵ In her memoir on motherhood, *A better woman* (2000), Susan Johnson says that learning of the suicide of Louise Erdrich’s writer husband, Michael Dorris, caused her to reflect on the relationship between life and writing. She says that the suicide shocked her because *The blue jay’s dance* had ‘presented a portrait of a composed family, both gentle and strong, rooted through love to the garden of life. The kind of family which made my own in comparison feel unruly, chaotic, governed by infantile rages and impulses’ (2000, 64). Then, she remarks, she was ‘forced to acknowledge all over again that writing is *not* life, or even truth, but merely fragments of both, imperfect reflections ... it can hide all the ugliness and pain behind a satisfying smooth surface ... a beautifully fashioned thing called a book ...’ (2000, 64-65).

accommodating contradiction and ambiguity. I have found the metaphor of the cave, which gained significance through my personal experience, valuable in my reading and writing about motherhood.

More than ten years ago, during an extended period of time out of the workforce while caring fulltime for my three young sons, I read a newspaper review of Vicki Mackenzie's *Cave in the Snow* (1999), the biography of Buddhist nun, Tenzin Palmo, who had lived alone for twelve years in a cave high in the Himalayas. While reading the descriptions of seclusion and isolation, and the ways in which the nun felt she had become a different woman, and a better one, through her retreat, I felt an unexpected connection. As a mother, I felt as though I had spent some time in a "cave" from which I could feel myself emerging. It did not seem a huge stretch of logic then to map Tenzin Palmo's extreme circumstances against my very ordinary ones. I had forgone professional opportunities to take the traditional path of stay-at-home mum, where I dwelt without a personal income, superannuation or career status. And although I had a sense that the world had carried along without me while I was "away", I did not feel that I had been left behind. I felt renewed energy and enthusiasm for re-entering the paid workforce and broader community life. Therefore, I was then, and continue to be now, drawn to stories where women have sometimes willingly, and sometimes unwittingly, entered into caves of their own, where they have persevered, and found springs within themselves of amazing depth.

I wish to make this connection between the cave, which I speak of as a time and place of constriction and scarcity, and personal growth. The ways in which the inhabitant is constricted are not necessarily material, and the gains are sometimes described as spiritual.⁶ In western society we have inherited, from as far back as Plato, a negative view of the cave that conveys images of oppressive darkness, deprivation and, above all, ignorance.⁷ Plato's allegory tells the story of a group of people who have lived their whole lives chained in a cave. They face a blank wall onto which are projected shadows of figures walking in front of a fire outside the cave. Plato says that this is as close to reality as these "prisoners" get. The philosopher, on the other hand, the educated, is free from the cave and can see things as they really are, can perceive the truth. This dominant view has pervaded our thinking about human life, and privileges experiences that are expansive, materially productive and public, over anything that is, by contrast, perceived as closed, narrow and private. A full appreciation of women's lives, and motherhood in particular, which have traditionally inhabited the private sphere, has been hampered by this patriarchal and politically loaded perspective.⁸ Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar's study of female Victorian writers, *The madwoman in the attic*, though written more than thirty years ago, is still regarded as an important twentieth century work of literary criticism. In it, they remark that 'it is the man who knows the cave, who analyses its

⁶ Some of the research drawn on to support this reading of the cave (particularly the work of feminist theologian Carol Christ) views this transformation in spiritual terms. For the purposes of this exegesis, spirituality is understood as a woman's growing understanding of herself and her place in a world that is constantly changing, and is not associated with any particular religious beliefs.

⁷ Part of *Republic*, a Socratic dialogue written by Plato, c. 380 BC. For a full discussion of this parable of the human condition, degraded and awaiting liberation through philosophy, see Julia Annas (1981) *An introduction to Plato's republic*, pp 242-271. For a full-text translation, Annas recommends, among others, Allan Bloom (1991) *The republic of Plato*.

⁸ Even Rich opens her first chapter in *Of woman born* with a quote from Simone Weil that likens ignorance to a cave that one must get oneself out of: '... to understand is always an ascending movement; that is why comprehension ought always to be concrete. (one is never got out of the cave, one comes out of it) (sic.) (1976, 21).

meaning, who (like Plato) authors its primary parables, and who even interprets its language ...'. Further, they ask, 'how therefore, does any woman—but especially a literary woman, who thinks in images—reconcile the cave's negative metaphoric potential with its positive mythic possibilities?' (1979, 95-96). The alternative reading of the cave provided below, and its application to both reading and writing about motherhood, goes some way, I hope, to reconciling this image by refocussing the concept of the cave from an imposing, constraining one, to an enabling one—in other words, from *oppression* to *opportunity*.

Whereas western philosophy views the emergence from the cave as a sign of educational enlightenment, some religious thinkers, in eastern and western traditions, have viewed times within the cave (hermitage), and times of scarcity (such as fasting and meditation) as opportunities for spiritual enlightenment. Tenzin Palmo, for example, reflecting on her experience of hermitage, claims that,

The advantage of going to a cave is that it gives you time and space to be able to concentrate totally ... [a] time of silence and isolation to look within and to find out who [you] really are, when [you're] not so busy playing roles (Mackenzie, 1999, 198).⁹

This alternative, yet equally well established, perception of the cave can be found time and again in literature. Christ, who researched women's spiritual experiences in the 1970s and 1980s, defined women's spiritual awareness as an 'awakening to the depths of her soul and her position in the universe' (1980, 8). She draws on examples of women characters in literature, such as Martha in Doris Lessing's *The four-gated city* (1969),

⁹ Peter France (1996) provides an engaging historical account of experiments with solitude and hermitage in the western tradition.

whose strength came from confronting the darkness within and without and then coming through to the other side (1980, xxx). In a more recent example, Drusilla Modjeska's unnamed narrator in *The orchard* (1994), encounters a literal darkness when she begins going blind. Reflecting on this "cave encounter" she says, 'I wouldn't say that I came to like it, not at all; it remained dark down there in the tunnel, and damp [but] I began to find ways of existing there, that's all ... I came to see that what is required of us at such times is not performance, but the simple task of being' (1994, 118). In looking for ways of being, she says: 'the question that was put to me was how to live with any bigness of spirit when the soil from which it must flourish has shrunk to a small handful of loam' (1994, 119).

Mothering, for some women, can feel at times like a "small handful of loam". But if women are allowed to explore their lives as mothers in the broadest and most personal sense, without fear of judgement, through the sharing of stories that reflect their experiences, they may discover themselves more highly skilled, and possessed of greater strength and insight than they had realized. O'Reilly says of the personal narratives in her book *Redefining motherhood* that they 'document the *everydayness* of life, and it is in this everyday space that much of [a mother's] learning takes place and quietly turns into wisdom and self-understanding' (Abbey and O'Reilly, 1998, 21). And from Cusk again, the realisation that within the physical and intellectual confines of motherhood comes a different awareness:

I find that I am living in the knowledge of what I have, so that I see happiness before it quite passes. It has taken me a year to achieve this feat, this skill that has eluded me over a lifetime. I understand that it means that I am standing still (2008, 212).

In the following discussion, the metaphor of the cave is applied to a fictional story about a mother, to demonstrate new ways of understanding some of these complex and rich, everyday, experiences of motherhood, and how they, like other life experiences, contribute to greater self-understanding.

“The cave” and fiction

Personal narrative and fiction in particular should be ideal mediums through which to explore motherhood, because of the occasions they provide to narrate subjective experience mostly absent in scholarly work. Curti argues that fiction can even help to *hold together* the myriad contradictions in our lives, and re-shape them into something different. She claims that

Fiction translates the overcoming of dichotomies—theory and politics, art and life, surface and depth, substance and appearance—into hybrid shapes and languages; its characters (sometimes monsters, sometimes shadows, sometimes ghosts) inhabit borders, intermediate spaces, and move in an indistinct zone at the intersection between the human and the animal, the natural and the supernatural, the beautiful and the horrid, the self and the many other selves (1998, 29).

And yet, in spite of the creative possibilities that fiction provides, few writers have used the medium to intimately explore motherhood from a mother’s perspective. Lionel Shriver’s novel, *We need to talk about Kevin* (2003), is a rare example of a fictional text where a mother’s relationships with her children and others, her perception of her role as a mother and how this impacts on her sense of self, and her struggle to balance her family’s needs with her own, are all central concerns of the story. It must be

acknowledged that the plot in this text is exceptional, and many of the events are far beyond the experiences of most mothers, but its inclusion in this discussion is justified because such a detailed account of a mother's day-to-day engagement with mothering, well beyond the baby years, is hard to find elsewhere. In some ways too, it can be argued that this story fits more neatly into Hansen's archive of "mothers without children", as Eva is separated from both her children at the time of narrating her tale. But because Eva's reflections are such a detailed recount of her many years *with* her children, the reader is offered an insight into these relationships in a personal and direct way. Permeating the story too are elements of restriction and confinement (social, emotional and intellectual) that suitably demonstrate a reading of motherhood as an experience of the cave.

In the novel, Eva Khatchadourian's teenage son, Kevin, is in a juvenile prison for the murder of several people at his high school two years previously. Through letters to her estranged husband, Eva looks back over her life; tracing, in great detail, her relationship with her son and acknowledging both her ambivalence about her feelings towards him and towards motherhood, and his reticence to love and be loved. Reflecting on the brutality her son demonstrated in many small ways from a young age, and his lack of remorse for his behaviour, Eva asks herself the questions every parent does: to what extent am I responsible for my child, to what degree have I shaped him? ¹⁰

¹⁰ In a television interview, Shriver admits that part of her motivation for writing this book was that she was in her early 40s and still childless, and felt it was time to address headlong the issue of whether or not she should become a mother. She says that 'it's been pointed out that I stacked the deck Once I finished the book I realised that if I'm capable of writing this book, if that's what I think of when I imagine motherhood, then it's probably not for me.' But she also claims that she wanted the book to grant parents permission to have moments of ambivalence, to be able to acknowledge the disappointments that

Eva's reflections reveal complexity and ambivalence, and a persistent effort to readjust her thoughts and actions to create for herself a better experience of motherhood. Most interesting, are the many small ways in which these adjustments cause Eva to further constrict her world. She goes deeper into her cave in an attempt to find her way out. For example when Kevin is four, Eva realizes that, so far, motherhood has not been enjoyable for her. She remarks,

... so far my commitment to motherhood had been toe-in-the-water. In a funny way, I resolved, I had to remake that decision of 1982 and jump into parenthood with both feet. I had to get pregnant with Kevin all over again. Like his birth, raising our son could be a transporting experience, but only if I stopped fighting it (2003, 120).

The decision to stay at home full-time with Kevin is not an easy one for Eva, who cherishes her independence, loves working and is passionate about her business. Shortly afterwards she is taken to see a house that her husband has bought without consulting her and, as she thinks about how much she hates it, she reflects:

My fantasy house would be old ... full of nooks and crannies whose original purpose had grown obsolete ... [would be] cozy and [close] the world out ... these wide plate glass windows advertised eternal open house (2003, 131).

Ironically, it is in this suburban house, alone with Kevin, that proves most suffocating for Eva, who finds herself imprisoned, socially ostracised from her neighbours and community, and intellectually cut off from the vibrant workings of her business.

must come with parenting because, like all life experiences, not every moment matches up to our expectations (Australian Broadcasting Corporation, 2006, n.p.).

In spite of her concentrated efforts, things do not improve; in fact they worsen. And yet, surprisingly, Eva makes an impulsive decision to have another child:

It was the oddest thing. I felt perfectly certain, and not in the fierce, clutching spirit that might have betrayed a crazy whim or frantic grab at a pat marital nostrum. I felt possessed and simple. This was the very unreserved resolve for which I had prayed during our protracted debate over parenthood, and whose absence had led us down tortuously abstract avenues ... (2003, 207).

Eva's decision illustrates the ways in which women, including mothers, make very clear decisions for themselves that are sometimes at odds with what others (concerned husbands, doctors, experts) would recommend. Further, Eva's decision is represented not as a desperate attempt to save a situation that is spiralling out of control, but a step she believes is necessary for her own spiritual growth as a woman. Eva tells her husband that she got pregnant again because she had 'to find something out ... about my soul' (2003, 215-16). Rather than seek escape, Eva intentionally journeys deeper into the restricting, confining life that motherhood is for her, in order to learn more about herself.

Although some parts of the story in *We need to talk about Kevin* are atypical, Eva's experiences as she tries to make the most of motherhood echo elements of my own mothering—times of social withdrawal and economic dependence—when I swayed between desolation and joy; time in the home with young children, skirting the fringes of the world of work and money and status that seemed to go along without me and without noticing me. And yet I often felt more privileged than I ever had before to be so actively involved in my children's lives. These figuratively closed spaces, and the

opportunity they can provide to benefit from a sustained experience (which is the purpose of hermitage) can be rich metaphors for the mothering experience.¹¹

This chapter has presented some examples of the mother's story. It has found that some writers are choosing to explore their mothering experiences in memoir rather than in fiction, their usual medium, suggesting that motherhood impacts on the subject in such a personal way that direct expression may at times be necessary. But new language too may be needed in order to convey experiences that have proved to be more complex and diverse than previously understood. The cave is one metaphor that accommodates the awareness that, for some women, motherhood may be both confining and empowering at the same time. In the next chapter, the implications of this awareness for writing original stories about motherhood are discussed, addressing the difficulties of conveying an idea, like the cave, in realist fiction, and the risks involved in writing motherhood at all.

¹¹ One reviewer, at least, would question my sympathy with Eva. Sarah Smith criticises Shriver's use of sensationalism in trying to achieve a picture of everyday parenting. She remarks: 'By linking motherhood's most ordinary fears to this cartoon horror, Shriver exploits parents' very worst thoughts—that somehow, despite their best efforts, their offspring will turn out to be sociopathic—while undermining them with the implication that really, raising a mass murderer is just one of those things, much like mastitis' (2003, n.p.).

Chapter 3

Writing Motherhood

The longing to tell one's story and the process of telling is symbolically a gesture of longing to recover the past in such a way that one experiences both a sense of reunion and a sense of release (hooks, 1998, 431).

This is how bell hooks describes the process of writing autobiography. The longing for release and the joy of reunion are ways to reconnect with past experiences that are no longer part of one's life, but that were significant in shaping who one has become, and for that reason deserve acknowledgement. I had no wish to write my experiences of motherhood in memoir, as Cusk and Enright have done, as I didn't feel the need to record or voice a faithful account of my life. But undeniably, when writing the collection of short fiction, "The Cave", which forms part of this thesis, I did draw on some experiences of motherhood that were significant in shaping my identity as a mother and the woman I am today. I hoped to achieve both a *reunion* with a very important time in my life, and a *release* from it: recognition that the process of moving on and away has begun. Importantly for me too was the opportunity to honour aspects of motherhood that have been silenced in the ruckus of theoretical and political discourses around motherhood over the past fifty years. Ambivalence goes both ways. Just as important as allowing women to express negative feelings and attitudes towards their maternal potential and experience is the need to acknowledge that, in spite of the

imperfections of motherhood, some women come to greater understandings of themselves, and even delight in the personal transformation they realize as mothers. As a writer, I find that the cave, which presented itself to me in a personal and direct way, is a metaphor capable of holding these aspects of motherhood that are *difficult, and yet—*. But I faced challenges in trying to convey a fresh perspective on mothering experiences. This chapter explores issues around “writing motherhood”. There is the need for subtlety when trying to express new ideas, so that they remain just that—ideas, not ideology. There is also the fear, when writing about motherhood in the home in particular, of unintentionally communicating universality, or of essentialising women’s experiences of motherhood. As a feminist I affirm women’s rights to choose their own responses to their maternal potential. But at the same time I strove to be true to the stories I was compelled to tell. The creative component of this thesis became, then, a manifestation of the representations of motherhood that this exegesis argues are mostly absent in literature. Writing the fiction allowed me to spend some time in the landscape of suburban motherhood, and the communities that mothers and children, who inhabit that landscape, are often drawn to. While I sojourned there, I sensed anew the aspects of stillness, isolation, and confinement that characterised my own experiences in that place as a younger mother. And I felt the same gratitude that I have always had for the opportunity to have been allowed to dwell there at all.

Writing “the cave”

Applying a metaphor to one’s reading is one thing. Actively working with it creatively is another. In preparing to write credible and meaningful stories about motherhood, I was prompted to reflect on the relationship between ideas and fiction.

Norma Tilden, writing teacher and scholar, claims that ‘the writer of creative nonfiction is fiercely attached to the *pursuit* of an idea resident in the facts of experience’ (2004, 709). This may be true for nonfiction, and may offer another explanation as to why fictions writers Cusk and Enright chose to explore motherhood in memoirs. Maybe their experiences produced strong and commanding ideas that had to be expressed and credited to personal experience. But fiction arouses different expectations in the reader. As children’s author, Katherine Paterson warns, ‘a person in a novel can *have* ideas, but if the idea has the person, we are not looking at truth but at propaganda’ (2001, 190). So I approached my writing with caution. While I wanted to convey ultimately positive messages about motherhood, I acknowledge that for some women, mothering is painful, restrictive, and counter-productive to their personal growth. It was important then, to ensure that the representations of motherhood in “The Cave” were credible without being dictatorial. Writer and broadcaster Liz Byrski describes encountering this problem in her writing:

... when I first wrote *Gang of Four* ... the [publisher] said, “Is this polemic or is it fiction? Because it can’t be both, and at the moment it isn’t either.” That was so useful, because I could see I had stuck my feminist politics up front rather than letting the ideas emerge through the characters (in Hunn, 2009, 17).

Thus, when I began to write the stories that peek into one mother, Jenny's, life at different intervals over fifteen years, I tried to ensure that the writing unfolded naturally, and was not self-consciously restrained by efforts to draw on overt "cave" imagery. Although the cave is a useful guiding tool for me as a writer, I needed to trust that if qualities of the cave were embedded in my representation of these experiences of motherhood (isolation, times of emotional darkness *and* of clarity, stillness, and oneness) then those qualities would come through the stories without too much explicit intervention on my part. I accepted that it was the qualities of the concept rather than its specifications that were important. I have said that the metaphor of the cave is very strong for me in my reading of motherhood, including the novel, *We need to talk about Kevin*, but I don't presume that any of the writers, such as Shriver, were thinking in cave imagery when they wrote their texts. In the same way, while the cave may be a strong framework for me when I imagine motherhood and the world that my characters live in, it is not guaranteed or necessary that all or any readers of my stories, in spite of the overarching title, should draw the same conclusions about motherhood from the texts. In "The Cave", I have tried to ensure that the cave remains what it always was—an idea. As an idea, the cave can be taken as a fancy of one writer and researcher, a vague notion, a way of thinking. It should never transpire into an ideology that tries to encompass all women's mothering experiences. Nevertheless, to communicate the qualities of the cave that I imagined required the subtlety to communicate the mundane in unexpected ways.¹

¹ This is not an attempt to oppose idea to ideology in any reductive way. Rather, to make clear that an idea (or image or metaphor) such as the cave, may better capture the complexity and subtlety of women's experiences in creative writing.

Creating language

Christ's research experiences again provide a fitting example of a writer's struggle to explore women's experiences in a new light. When she tried to write about women's spirituality in the early 1970s, she encountered a problem with language. She wanted to talk about women's connection to larger powers experienced in nature and sexuality, and found she was without the words to enable her to do so. She finally adopted terms from mystical traditions, ones reserved for so-called "higher" spiritual experiences reached by people who engaged in flights from the mundane human condition—priests, monks, hermits—not ordinary men and women, mothers, wives and lovers. She found herself using the words *nothingness*, *awakening*, *insight* and *mysticism*, but in a different context than that in which they were used traditionally. She says that she was engaging in the deconstructionist process of 'deforming [language—using] traditional language, but in a context which gave it a different meaning' (1980, xiii). Language is not deformed in the sense of being corrupted or vulgarised, but in being re-situated and used otherwise to create a new meaning. It is a process of transformation. Rather than avoid these mystical terms because of their usual association with an exclusive religious experience, she claims the words to describe women's spiritual life.

I experienced this process of de-formation when I read the story of Tenzin Palmo and felt compelled to grab it and claim it as my own: to take something reserved for the highest order of spiritual experience, the cave, and draw it to me—a housewife and mother in a suburban home in Perth. It was an empowering experience and formed the

basis of the approach I would take when writing about motherhood. This was a framework that could engage with the narrowed landscapes of the suburban home and the social spheres that mothers and children inhabited, without presuming to assign negative, ideological judgements about women's oppression to those circumstances. And yet I felt self-conscious of the very problems that Christ encountered in her writing:

To use language with awareness that we are de-forming it, deliberately changing its meaning by changing its context, is an exercise fraught with danger. We may be misunderstood by those with whom we agree because they do not understand the new contexts in which we use old words. Or we may evoke agreement from those with whom we disagree, because they too have not understood the new context which de-forms, re-forms, and trans-forms the meanings of the words we use. But this is the risk we take in attempting to make ourselves understood. Perhaps there is no other way to create new language (1980, xv).

Writing motherhood is fraught with danger, because it is a subject that cannot be divorced from its cultural and ideological history. We have already seen the reactions that Cusk's memoir received, and the degree to which many of the comments were personal attacks on the author's fitness as a mother. Such criticisms indicate the inability, amongst some readers, to accept language commonly heard elsewhere, now used in relation to motherhood. Cusk claims that such readers, who could not accommodate mothers expressing anything other than undying love for their children and pure satisfaction in their role, find 'honesty akin to blasphemy when the religion is that of motherhood' (2008, 4). What I feared, when I was honest with myself, is that in conveying motherhood as an experience that could be personally, even spiritually transforming for women, I might find unexpected and unwelcome affirmation from conservative sectors of the community who might view my fiction as validation of

traditional mothering, and I might raise the hackles of fellow feminists who have, for so long, fought to liberate women from these very assumptions. Writing motherhood then, seemed like a risky pursuit. Is this what Chow means in warning women that self-representation doesn't automatically equate with liberation, because it can make the subject even more vulnerable than before, to the powers that have subordinated them? But the alternative—silence—is exactly where this argument began.

Embracing the risks

I can articulate directly in this exegesis what I mean by a cave experience and how it may serve as a metaphor for some life choices that narrow our “scope”, as mothering can for some women. I can also stress that while I wish to write positively about motherhood at home, and suggest that transformative experiences may occur even in restricting, traditional circumstances, I am not advocating a return to traditional, restrictive assumptions about how, when and if women should mother. I do not wish to fall back on stereotypes, or to suggest that women's experiences are universal. Fiction, however, does not avail the writer of a platform for such explicit explanations. Stories do not *tell* everything, but allow the characters, setting, and events to *reveal* something. Good fiction writers do, of course, communicate ideas and values in their writing, but this takes skill, and courage. The courage comes in ensuring that fears, like those expressed above, do not silence the writer. Keniston warns that the fear of essentialising can in itself be restricting for women, and points out that antiessentialism, seen in the ‘recent tendency of feminist critics to hunt down and denounce essentialism in feminist texts’ is itself historically contingent (2004, 232). She argues that feminism needs to

overcome its aversion to generalisations that are in some way unavoidable if attempts to situate personal experience in socio-historical contexts are to be continued. Feminist researcher, Heather Maroney, writing about motherhood and new feminist theory, describes this dilemma facing the women's movement when it attempts to represent motherhood, as a walk along a tightrope between offensive and defensive poles, trying to 'assert feminist theory in our own terms, validating "what women do" (and have done historically) in mothering at the same time as it contests patriarchal glorification of the role at the expense of the occupant' (in Weeder-Zuidersma, 2006, 12). Cusk's case illustrates that complete authorial control of the meaning of any work is impossible. Nevertheless, story can narrow the gaps in our understanding of the mother's experience by acting as a balancing pole in the walk along that tightrope, expressed in Boulton's terms as strung between the two camps, those who view motherhood as natural, and those who view it as a trap.

Cusk resolved the matter of having to live with conflicting reactions to her book by arriving at a deeper understanding of the truth that "you can't please everyone". She concluded that with the world having 'many more mothers than an author generally has readers' (2008, 5), *A life's work* attracted too diverse a readership. Consequently, she believed that many of the people who picked up her book were happy to engage with something of the ambivalence she describes, but only if it was 'immediately repressed by the far stronger desire for authority and consensus, for "normality" to be restored' (2008, 5). Many of these readers, she understood, found the book to be bleak, depressing and even ungrateful. But, confirming the thrust of this exegesis, that the mother's story

needs to be told and available, Cusk writes that although she no longer expects her book to speak to everyone, she retains ‘the hope that for those who want to hear it, it is at least preferable to silence’ (2008, 6). In the same vein, and drawing inspiration from hooks who describes her autobiography as the joining of the ‘bits and pieces of my heart’ (1998, 432), I hope that “The Cave” captures some of the fragments of *my* heart, and, in preference to silence, contributes to the telling of women’s stories, that it is authentic to my experience without being essentialist, and that it achieves subtlety while creating a new language which offers an alternative representation of being a mother.

Conclusion

Human experience is often described in spatial terms, where the participant feels as though he or she inhabits, for a time at least, a different, parallel world to others. This is commonly expressed by people who find themselves suddenly thrust into the hospital system, especially when it concerns a long-term illness. In the same way, motherhood, particularly when it involves the fulltime care of young children, can sometimes feel like a place.¹ It has a feel of its own, a quality that separates it from other, more public human circumstances, making it sometimes incongruous with the world beyond the home and community in which many mothers and children dwell. Even time is different there, where mealtimes and bedtimes operate on schedules that can differ by hours from that powerful adult world that operates “nine to five”, and within which is located the evidences of achievement and success that are cornerstones of our culture. As a way of summarizing the key themes of this exegesis, this first point, that motherhood is a place, is crucial. From this basis spring two other central arguments. One is that motherhood, while confining and spare in many ways, can be a wonderful place to be. This exegesis has proposed (in a resistant reading to long-held cultural assumptions that it represents imprisonment and ignorance) that the cave can represent motherhood as a location that is isolated and confining, and apparently stagnant, but where nonetheless subtle transformations are occurring all the time. The second argument actually brings us back

¹ Cusk calls mothers ‘the countries we come from’ (2008, 212).

to the key research focus that this exegesis began with—that many more representations of motherhood need to be available to us, especially in the form of story.

We have seen how Rich's *Of woman born*, opened up a whole new way of writing about motherhood because of the inclusion of personal experience in theoretical work. Prior to its publication, discussions about motherhood and mothers had been left to the experts—to doctors and scholars who had the theoretical knowledge and credentials to draw conclusions about human experience. Rich challenged this monopoly by giving the mother, in this case herself, a voice. In the most accessible way, Rich made room for the mother's story. The search for other occurrences of the mother's story has been approached through the three aspects of research, reading and writing. Of course these overlap, and are all, in some way, aspects of both scholarly research and creative writing. But it is useful to treat them separately for a further moment in order to draw attention to implications for future work in this field.

As a researcher, I have been overwhelmed by the wealth of material about motherhood. Psychological and sociological research forms a major part of the work that this exegesis draws on. Continued research in all fields and disciplines is necessary to further understand this aspect of women's lives that is both ordinary and profound. Much of the focus of contemporary research on motherhood, such as the work of Abbey and O'Reilly (1998) and O'Reilly (2004), is on the variety of ways in which feminists are redefining motherhood. Notwithstanding the privileged position of scholarly research, attempts are being made to open the dialogue to wider and more inclusive perspectives,

representing different cultural backgrounds, sexual orientations, and social circumstances. This movement is welcome and will undoubtedly contribute to greater manifestations of the mother's story in theoretical, critical and creative discourses.

The overview of reading provided in this exegesis has revealed that the mother's own story, of the kind that centres *her* concerns in the heart of the narrative, has been mostly absent in fiction and non-fiction narratives. Research into contemporary narratives has found that the mother's story is emerging, but that it seems particularly important to the writers of these stories that they are identified as the main protagonist in the story.

Motherhood in memoir is a growing field. But this exegesis prods further, and demands that the mother's story be fully represented in fiction too. The absence of her story can only be viewed with suspicion. While fiction remains a hallmark of the literary canon, the absence of the mother's story is an oversight, and indicates the still dubious value placed on mothers (and indeed children), their relationships with their children and others, the work they do, and the ways in which these experiences challenge and shape women. It has been suggested that this silence reflects a reticence to deal with an experience that is widely misunderstood and underrepresented. The cave is one metaphor with which to approach the reading and writing of motherhood, but there is a great need for other metaphors to create new language with which to articulate the complexity of this experience.

We have seen that writing motherhood can be a risky business, because it tackles a subject with a long and complicated history that touches every human being at a

personal level. But it is imperative that writers embrace the risk and tell the mother's story in whatever ways they are compelled to, understanding that each and every story can only represent one experience, but that collectively, the telling of and listening to these stories contribute to a much deeper understanding of human life.

In attempting to be specific about the silences under investigation in this exegesis, and given the nature and scope of this research project, it has not been possible to fully develop certain contradictions to claims made here. But they remain important nonetheless. For instance, it has been acknowledged that motherhood is never one thing for all women, and that many women report experiences of motherhood very differently to the way it has been described here. Not all mothers, including those who care for their children fulltime and do not work outside the home, would agree that motherhood is a cave experience or, if it was, that they found it to be positive. Many recount the isolation and invisibility of early motherhood with bitterness. There is also Hansen's claim that there *is* an extensive archive of fiction about motherhood. The focus of this exegesis is on stories of mothers as they actively care for their children; therefore, it seemed necessary to draw a distinction between Hansen's archive and the texts referred to in this paper. But her research could be revisited. The stories about mothers and their experiences of loss that her work uncovered, and other similar stories that have appeared in this millennium, would make interesting research. For now, however, the spotlight is on stories of mothers *with* their children.

So, allow me to conclude with Jenny.

The kids had been driving me crazy. Paul seemed to be irritable about everything; from the cereal I'd given him for breakfast to the fact that he'd already seen that episode of *Play School*. Abby, possibly teething, wasn't letting me out of her sight for more than a minute without wailing for me to go to her. It was only ten-thirty and I'd shut myself in my room to block out their whining and get my thoughts together. I sat on the end of the bed, grasping the quilt with whitened knuckles, and stared out of the window. There was a beautiful, cloudless sky. The kind of spring sunshine that shouldn't be wasted. I had to get out. I had to be seen. I acted quickly. I packed some sausages and fruit and bottles of water into a backpack. I cajoled Paul into getting up off the floor and helping me, with the idea of a barbeque in the park. He jumped up at once.

'Can I ... take my roller skates?'

I found them under his bed and he ran outside with them. I strapped the kids into the Datsun, Abby in her car seat, and set off. Paul had assumed we were going to the playground at the local sports oval where I usually took him when he needed to run around. He cried out indignantly when I passed the turn-off.

'It's alright,' I said. 'We're going to a *real* park.'

The real park was nearer the city. In the centre was a lake surrounded by enormous flame trees whose branches swept the surface of the water like giant, graceful dancers taking a bow. I needed to be somewhere lovely. Beside the water, the shade from the trees extended across the banks and sheltered a small sand pit and swing area. There, I found a park bench to drop the backpack onto.

I helped Paul into his skates and watched him set off, legs stiffly astride, for the bitumen path that circled the lake. I let Abby toddle over to the playground because she loved to dig her hands into the cool sand and let it fall between her fingers. I stayed on the bench and alternately watched them both, nodding encouragement to one, and wonder to the other. I took a deep breath and slumped against the wooden slats. Everything about being there at the park, in that moment, felt right. The trees filtered the sound of the city traffic so that the more musical notes of birds and children playing could be heard. Wherever it found a gap between the leaves, sunlight splattered the ground, so that all around me was a patchwork of light and dark.

A few other women and children were over by the swings and the small, rocky cave in the middle of the sand. There was an unhurried air about them. By contrast, other people using the park at that time seemed on a schedule. There were gardeners, of course, weeding and raking and fiddling with sprinkler parts. And pedestrians taking a shortcut though the park on their way to somewhere else. And there was a man whom I pegged as an office worker, trying to fit in some exercise during his lunch break. Early twenties, I guessed. He'd loosened his tie, and with his jacket hooked over his shoulder, he walked briskly around the path that circled the lake. He passed me twice, and both times I felt that, although I kept my eyes on him the whole time, he didn't see me at all. I was invisible to him. A two-way mirror separated us, and I was on the side that could see through. This is how it often feels. At home or out, it doesn't change.

Paul, the roller-skating adventurer, tired of his efforts and stepping the last few feet towards me, stopped against the bench. His face was clammy and he fell, out of breath, on to the seat beside me, his knees higher than usual because of the skates.

‘I’m hungry. I wanna sausage.’

‘Soon. I’ll cook them soon.’

Abby saw Paul with me. She left the sandpit immediately and teetered back over the grass. I pulled her on to my lap and brushed fine, white grains of sand off her knees.

The man approached from a bend in the lake for a third and last time. Huffing now, his shirt sticking to his back, he passed us a few metres away, and again didn’t even glance in our direction. He had something he needed to do, and limited time to do it in. His focus was palpable.

I watched after him. Then I drew my arms tighter around my children, who responded by nuzzling their soft heads into my armpit and belly. As strongly as I sensed this man’s time constraint, I felt my leisure; that I didn’t have to be anywhere else right then, that I had all the time in the world. An hour before, the day couldn’t have gone fast enough. But now, time stood still. And I didn’t mind.

Bibliography

- Abbey, Sharon, and Andrea O'Reilly, eds. 1998. *Redefining motherhood: Changing identities and patterns*. Toronto: Second Story Press.
- Annas, Julia. 1981. *An introduction to Plato's republic*. Oxford: Clarendon Press.
- Atwood, Margaret. 1982. Adrienne Rich: Of woman born. In *Second words: Selected critical prose*, edited by M. Atwood. Toronto: House of Anansi Press.
- Australian Broadcasting Corporation. 2006. Author Shriver speaks about writing, motherhood. *The 7.30 Report*. 12 September. TV program transcript.
<http://www.abc.net.au/7.30/content/2006/s1739456.htm> (accessed 17 April 2009).
- Australian Broadcasting Corporation. 1966-present. *Play school*.
- Australian Bureau of Statistics. 2008. Families Week facts and figures from the ABS (Media release) May 12, 2008.
<http://www.abs.gov.au/ausstats/abs@.nsf/mediareleasesbytitle/6275FA0AE2EB5868CA2574460082299B?OpenDocument> (accessed 13 May 2009).
- Bacchi, Carol. 2003. *Fear of food: A diary of mothering*. Melbourne: Spinifex Press.
- Balint, Alice. 1949. Love for the mother and mother love. *International journal of psychoanalysis*, 30, pp 251-59.
- Beaumont, Maria. 2007. *Motherland*. London: Hodder & Stoughton.
- Bloom, Allan. 1991. *The republic of Plato*. 2nd ed. New York: Basic Books.

- Boulton, Mary Georgina. 1983. *On being a mother: A study of women with pre-school children*. London and New York: Tavistock Publications.
- Bowden, Peta. 1997. *Caring: Gender sensitive ethics*. London and New York: Routledge.
- Boyd, Elizabeth Reid. 2000. "Being there": Mothers who stay at home. A study of separations in nature and time, PhD thesis. Murdoch University, Perth, WA.
- Brophy, Kevin. 1998. Kristeva, literature and motherhood statements. *Southerly* 58:1, pp 34-40.
- Brown, Stephanie, Judith Lumley, Rhonda Small, and Jill Astbury. 1994. *Missing voices: The experience of motherhood*. Melbourne: Oxford University Press.
- Buchanan, Andrea. 2006. *The secret life of mothers: Maternal narrative, momoirs, and the rise of the blog*. The mothers movement online.
http://www.mothersmovement.org/features/06/a_buchanan_prn.html (accessed 31 October 2008).
- Chandler, Mielle. 1998. Emancipated subjectivities and the subjugation of mothering practices. In *Redefining motherhood: Changing identities and patterns*, edited by S. Abbey and A. O'Reilly. Toronto: Second Story Press.
- Chodorow, Nancy. 1978. *The reproduction of mothering: Psychoanalysis and the sociology of gender*. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press.
- Chow, Rey. 2001. Gender and representation. In *Feminist consequences: Theory for the new century*, edited by E. Bronfen and M. Kavka. New York: Columbia University Press.

- . 2003. Sexuality. In *A concise companion to feminist theory*, edited by M. Eagleton. Oxford; Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing.
- Christ, Carol P. 1986. *Diving deep and surfacing: Women writers on spiritual quest*. 2nd edition. Boston: Beacon Press.
- Cixous, Hélène. 1990. Difficult joys. In *The body and the text: Hélène Cixous, reading and teaching*, edited by H. Wilcox, K. McWatters, A. Thompson and L. R. Williams. New York and London: Harvester Wheatsheaf.
- Cixous, Hélène, translated by Keith Cohen, and Paula Cohen. 1976. The laugh of the medusa. *Signs* 1:4, pp 875-893.
- Clements, Ron, and John Musker. 1989. *The little mermaid*. USA: Walt Disney Pictures.
- Costa, Jacqueline da. 2006. From feminist theologian to theologian: The life and work of Carol P. Christ. *Feminist theology* 14, pp 311-326.
- Curti, Lidia. 1998. *Female stories, female bodies: narrative, identity and representation*. London: Macmillan Press.
- Cusk, Rachel. 2008. I was only being honest. *The Guardian*. 21 March.
www.guardian.co.uk/books/2008/mar/21/biography.women (accessed 10 June 2009).
- . 2008. *A life's work: On becoming a mother*. London: Faber and Faber.
- Daly, Brenda O., and Maureen T. Reddy. 1991. *Narrating mothers: Theorizing maternal subjectivities*. Knoxville: The University of Tennessee Press.
- Dawson, Jill, and Margo Daly, eds. 2002. *Gas and air: Tales of pregnancy and beyond*. London: Bloomsbury.
- Deutsch, Helen. 1945. *The psychology of women*, vol. 2. New York: Grune and Stratton.

- Dinnerstein, Dorothy. 1976. *The mermaid and the minotaur: Sexual arrangements and human malaise*. New York: Harper and Row.
- Dobris, Catherine A., and Kim White-Mills. 2006. Rhetorical visions of motherhood: A feminist analysis of the "What to expect" series. *Women and language* 29:1, pp 26-36.
- dornfest, asha. 2005. "Momoir" genre tapped out? *ashaland*. 25 March.
http://weblog.ashaland.com/ashaland/2005/03/latest_ibrain_c.html (accessed 31 October 2008).
- DuPlessis, Rachel Blau. 1978. Washing blood: Introduction to this issue. *Feminist studies* 4:2, pp 1-12.
- Eagleton, Mary, ed. 2003. *A concise companion to feminist theory*. Series editor D. Bradshaw, *Blackwell concise companions to literature and culture*. Oxford and Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing.
- Enguidanos, G.M, and Gloria E. Law. 1995. A search for spirituality: A mother and daughter story. In *Women's spirituality, women's lives*, edited by E. C. Judith Ochshorn.
 New York: Harrington Park Press.
- Enright, Anne. 2004. *Making babies: Stumbling into motherhood*. London: Vintage.
- . 2007. Diary. *London review of books*. 4 October.
www.lrb.co.uk/v29/n19/print/enri01_.html (accessed 31 October 2008).
- Ephron, Nora. 1993. *Sleepless in Seattle*. USA: TriStar Pictures.
- Erdrich, Louise. 1996. *The blue jay's dance: A birth year*. London: Flamingo.

- Fedler, Joanne. 2006. *Secret mothers' business: One night, eight women, no kids, no holding back*. Sydney: Allen & Unwen.
- Fields, Suzanne. 2002. The high honor of being a homemaker (the last word). *Insight on the news* 18:29, pg 48.
- Figes, Kate. 2000. *Life after birth*. London: Penguin Books.
- Firestone, Shulamith. 1970. *The dialectic of sex: The case for feminist revolution*. New York: William Morrow.
- Fowles, John. 1963. *The collector*. New York. Dell Publishing.
- France, Peter. 1996. *Hermits: The insights of solitude*. New York: St Martin's Press.
- Friedan, Betty. 1963. *The feminine mystique*. New York: W.W. Norton & Co.
- Furman, Erna. 2001. *On being and having a mother*. Madison, CT: International Universities Press.
- Gale, Carolyn. 1998. The tale of a mother and daughter is not one but two stories. *Westerly*. Summer, pp 19-26.
- Garner, Helen. 1984. *The children's bach*. Fitzroy, Victoria: McPhee Gribble/Penguin Books.
- Gibbs, Anna. 2005. Fictocriticism, affect, mimesis: Engendering differences. *TEXT*. 9:1. <http://www.textjournal.com.au/april05/gibbs.htm> (accessed 19 October 2009).
- Gilbert, Sandra. M., and Susan Gubar. 1979. *The Madwoman in the attic: The woman writer and the nineteenth-century literary imagination*. New Haven: Yale University Press.
- Gilligan, Carol. 1982. *In a different voice: Psychological theory and women's development*. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press.

- Glenn, Evelyn Nakano. 1994. Social constructions of mothering: A thematic approach. In *Mothering: ideology, experience and agency*, edited by E. N. Glenn, G. Chang and L. R. Forcey. New York: Routledge.
- Goodwin, James. 1993. *Autobiography: The self made text*. New York: Twayne Publishers.
- Gorman, Vanessa. 2005. *Layla's story*. Camberwell, Victoria: Viking.
- Gray, John. 1992. *Men are from mars, women are from venus*. New York: HarperCollins Publishers.
- Green, Fiona Joy. 2004. Feminist mothers: Successfully negotiating the tension between motherhood as "institution" and "experience". In *From motherhood to mothering: The legacy of Adrienne Rich's Of woman born*, edited by A. O'Reilly. Albany, NY: State University of New York Press.
- Hansen, Elaine Tuttle. 1997. *Mother without child: Contemporary fiction and the crisis of motherhood*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Hansen, Jane. 2007. *Three seasons: An autumn of war, a winter of loss, a spring of hope*. Sydney: Pan Macmillan.
- Hebblethwaite, Margaret. 1984. *Motherhood and God*. London: Geoffrey Chapman.
- Heilbrun, Carolyn. 1988. *Writing a woman's life*. London: The Women's Press.
- hooks, bell. 1998. Writing autobiography. In *Women, autobiography, theory: A reader*, edited by S. Smith and J. Watson. Madison : University of Wisconsin Press.
- Horniman, Joanne. 2006. *Little wing*. Sydney: Allen & Unwin.
- Hunn, Deborah. 2009. Finding the gap: A conversation with Liz Byrski. *indigo* 3, pp 10-17.

- Ingman, Heather. 1998. *Women's fiction between the wars: Mothers, daughters and writing*. New York: St. Martin's Press.
- Johnson, Susan. 2000. *A better woman*. Sydney: Random House Australia.
- Kaplan, E. Ann. 1992. *Motherhood and representation: The mother in popular culture and modern melodrama*. London: Routledge.
- Keniston, Ann. 2004. Beginning with "I": The legacy of Adrienne Rich's *Of woman born*. In *From motherhood to mothering: The legacy of Adrienne Rich's Of woman born*, edited by A. O'Reilly. New York: W.W. Norton & Company.
- Kerr, Heather, and Amanda Nettelbeck, eds. 1998. *The space between: Australian women writing fictocriticism*. Perth, WA: University of Western Australia Press.
- Knowles, Jane Price. 1990. Woman-defined motherhood. In *Motherhood: A feminist perspective*, edited by J. P. Knowles and E. Cole. New York: The Hawthorn Press.
- Kolodny, Annette. 1985. Dancing through the minefield: Some observations on the theory, practise, and politics of a feminist literary criticism. In *The new feminist criticism: Essays on women, literature and theory*, edited by E. Showalter. New York: Pantheon Books.
- Kristeva, Julia. 1986. Woman's time. In *The Kristeva reader*, edited by T. Moi. Oxford: Blackwell Publishers.
- Leach, Penelope. 1979. *Who cares: A new deal for mothers and their small children*. Harmondsworth: Penguin Books.
- Lette, Kathy. 1994. *Foetal attraction*. Sydney: Picador.
- Lessing, Doris. 1969. *The four gated city*. London: MacGibbon & Kee.

- Mackenzie, Vicki. 1999. *Cave in the snow*. London: Bloomsbury.
- Maushart, Susan. 1997. *The mask of motherhood: How motherhood changes everything and why we pretend it doesn't*. Milsons Point, NSW: Random House Australia.
- Miller, Tina. 2005. *Making sense of motherhood: A narrative approach*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Modjeska, Drusilla. 1994. *The orchard*. Sydney: Macmillan.
- Moi, Toril. 1985. *Sexual/textual politics: Feminist literary theory*. London, New York: Methuen.
- , ed. 1986. *The Kristeva reader*. Oxford: Blackwell Publishers.
- Morris, Pam. 1993. *Literature and feminism*. Oxford: Blackwell Publishers.
- Munro, Alice. 1996. *Selected stories*. London: Chatto & Windus.
- Nicholson, Joyce. 1983. *The heartache of motherhood*. Ringwood, Victoria: Penguin Books.
- Oakley, Ann. 1974. *Woman's work: The housewife past and present*. New York: Vintage Books.
- Ochs, Carol. 1983. *Women and spirituality*. Totowa, New Jersey: Rowman & Allanheld.
- O'Reilly, Andrea, ed. 2004. *From motherhood to mothering: The legacy of Adrienne Rich's Of woman born*. Albany, NY: State University of New York Press.
- Paterson, Katherine. 2001. *The invisible child: On reading and writing books for children*. New York: Dutton Children's Books.
- Phillips, Jenny. 1985. *Mothers matter too!* Melbourne: Thomas Nelson Australia.
- Rich, Adrienne. 1976. *Of woman born: Motherhood as experience and institution*. New York: W. W. Norton & Company.

- Romney, Rodney. 1999. *Wilderness spirituality: Finding your way in an unsettled world*. Boston: Element Books.
- Ruddick, Sara. 1980. Maternal thinking. *Feminist studies* 6:2, pp342-67.
- Shriver, Lionel. 2003. *We need to talk about Kevin*. New York: Counterpoint.
- Smith, Sidonie. 1987. *A poetics of women's autobiography: Marginality and the fictions of self-representation*. Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press.
- Smith, Sidonie, and Julia Watson, eds. 1998. *Women, autobiography, theory: A reader*. Madison, WI: The University of Wisconsin Press.
- Smith, Sarah A. 2003. We need to talk about Kevin. *guardian.co.uk*. 15 November. www.guardian.co.uk/books/2003/nov15/featuresreviews (accessed 6 January 2010).
- Snitow, Ann. 1992. Feminism and motherhood: An American reading. *Feminist review* 40, pp 32-51.
- Stanley, Liz. 1992. *The auto/biographical I: The theory and practice of feminist auto/biography*. Manchester: Manchester University Press.
- . 1994. The knowing because experiencing subject: Narratives, lives and autobiography. In *Knowing the difference: Feminist perspectives in epistemology*, edited by K. Lennon and M. Whitford. London: Routledge.
- Thorpe, Vanessa. 2004. Making babies: Stumbling into motherhood (review). *The Observer*. 1 August. <http://www.guardian.co.uk/books/2004/aug/01/booksonhealth.features> (accessed 1 January 2010).

Tilden, Norma. 2004. Nothing quite your own: Reflections on creative nonfiction.

Women's studies 33:6, pp 707-718.

Tropp, Laura. 2006. Faking a sonogram: Representations of motherhood on *Sex and the city*. *The journal of popular culture* 39:5, pp 861-877.

Weeda-Zuidersma, Jeanette. 2006. Keeping mum: Representations of motherhood in contemporary Australian literature—a fictocritical exploration, PhD thesis.

University of Western Australia, Perth, WA.

Weedon, Chris. 2003. Subjects. In *A concise companion to feminist theory*, edited by M. Eagleton. Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing.

Wilcox, Helen, Keith McWatters, Ann Thompson, and Lind R. Williams, eds. 1990. *The body and the text: Hélène Cixous, reading and teaching*. New York and London: Harvester Wheatsheaf.

Winnicott, Donald. 1975. *Through paediatrics to psychoanalysis*. London: Hogarth Press.

Wolf, Naomi. 2003. *Misconceptions: Truth, lies, and the unexpected on the journey to motherhood*. New York: Anchor Books.

Wolitzer, Meg. 2008. *The ten year nap*. New York: Riverhead Books.

Yokoi, Daisuke. 1984. *Chubby engine*. New York: Simon & Schuster.